shaken from bell towers to our shoulders

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by chaparral_crown

Summary

It is said at a holiday party that Will Graham is the least likely of all the FBI and Quantico staff to ever seriously consider having sex with a co-worker.

But the universe likes a challenge, at least one co-worker is on the radar, and allergy season is nigh.

Notes

For my Twitter follower poll. You did this to me.

Want to learn more? Want to wreck more havoc on my writing habits? Come, join me at @chaparralcrown on the bird website, where more polls such as this await to prove to you I am a very serious writer with very serious aspirations.

Dammit Janet

Cosmically speaking, Will can only figure that the whole thing begins because God likes a challenge.

The agnostics and atheists have got it all wrong - one shouldn't ask for the resurrection of the dead, or world peace, or even water to wine as a testament of His Strength, or His Ultimate Power, or His Final Boss Form, whatever they're asking as proof of concept these days with unnecessary caps on their descriptions.

Will for one sincerely hopes the Almighty, if such a thing exists, is not the type to insist on being called 'Doctor' at every social function, of which the upper case designations feels remarkably similar.

Instead, Will's counting on God being more akin to a wizardly professor he's met at conferences from Santa Fe who insists on being called Tony even though he is amongst the most heavily cited scholars in the field of non-invasive subdermal laser imaging, and starts drinking by 2 pm at the host hotel's bar. *That's* the kind of entity he can get behind as supreme deity of the universe. Proof of Tony's existence is an expense report, and a hangover on the flight back to Virginia, no acts of transfiguration required.

As it stands, however, the universe is lazy, and prefers the path of least resistance in all things involving transformative force. It also tends to choose the least expected and unwanted of things to transform, like God or the universe would prefer to clean the hall bathroom instead of pick up Their Holiest of Messes from the Big Bang, or answer prayers and requests of actual importance.

For this year's indignity of choice, the entirety of creation bends its ears to an off-handed comment made at the Quantico Christmas Party. Will thinks in hindsight that it does this because for the first time ever, he'd very much prefer the present company *not* speculate about him in a hopeful bid to actually keep a friend for once.

Against Will's better judgment, he is in attendance today not out of expectation, but on request - the Behavioral Sciences Unit invites itself in full when Will off-handedly mentions not being big on holiday parties because he doesn't really have anyone to go with. Jack Crawford has a standing invitation year over year, so it's not a stretch for him to attend if his workload allows.

(*It doesn't, but he acts like he's going up until it's obvious amongst the rest of them in attendance that he's not.*)

Jimmy Price has never seen a social event he didn't want to go to, and Brian Zeller has never seen a social event with Jimmy Price in attendance that he didn't want to people-watch at. Beverly, being the most well-adjusted of the team, already has plans but drops them when Alana insists it'll be a good time with minimal resistance.

Hannibal Lecter, who by all rights is free and clear of this slush fund surplus spending attempt, offers to go when Will relays that everyone is going and he's living in existential dread of it.

"It's alright, Will," he says with one of those softly amused smiles that he wears like a tie pin - required, but deceptively personal. Will never really knows if those are for him or for everyone. He's not interested in the kind meant for sharing. "You've survived a lot worse than deli meat and cheese rolls and a photo booth. Surely a moment not spent face down in a corpse is cause for celebration, yes?"

One would think, but he finds himself more comfortable at the idea of being here in a psychiatrist's office than at a work function, even if he's technically not here for a traditional appointment. That's a little embarrassing to admit, so he says nothing regarding that, and does what he always does - fixate on bodies.

"Maybe I like being face down in a corpse. I've been told by experts such as yourself that routines are important," Will replies dryly, pressing the balls of his feet into the floor of the office until the laces of his loafers creak.

Hannibal's smile goes toothy, a rare gleam in his face that Will is always warmed to see. These ones are hard-won, rare as a rosy sunset on winter snow. These he does care about. "Incidentally, I do too. Perhaps we should keep things copacetic and ensure that things stay on topic throughout the proceedings. If it's like any other work function, I assure you that they'll stray to all the usual haunts."

Hannibal thinks about that for a second. "Or about sex," he says ponderously. "I am constantly surprised by how quickly it strays there instead."

Will's mouth twists into something awkward, even as he huffs a laugh.

"'Professional distance' is the new 'no homo'?" he asks, and Hannibal gestures with raised palms like it's not *his* idea, it's just probability. "I don't know anyone but you that says copacetic out loud, but I also don't know anyone but you that would want to wax nostalgic about ossuaries and examining skull fractures at an office holiday party, so I guess you are a welcome plus one."

Which is how Will finds himself holding a warming beer bottle, resisting the temptation to peel the lifting label, but unsure how to disguise the dying of his spirit while everyone takes bets on who amongst the single professionals disappears first for the age old tradition of the Holiday Party Hookup, and nary a tit-for-tat about post-mortem hematomas to be had.

Will would blame Hannibal, but Hannibal is having a good time, and Will rides the second-hand waves of that, because you should want your friends to be happy. He smiles again at Will at one point, a jaunty cheers between them.

(*You look away - you don't know why, heart in throat, overwhelmed at the attention when all you usually want is to not be seen.*)

"You'd think after the Fourth of July barbecue that they'd know better than to leave the seltzers where accounting can get a hold of them without a chaperone," says Alana, red cheeked and leaning back into a rental cocktail table, billowing with a velvet fabric that the planner likely thought of as America Blue™, but reads more as emergency Wal-Mart purchase.

Very appropriate, Will thinks. Very on brand for the federal government.

"They make the budget for the catering," he says into the neck of the beer bottle. "Seems fair they get to decide how much they get to indulge in it."

"Besides," Beverly says, halfway through a very tidy line of beer label torn from her own drink, and twirled into a very pleasing spiral, "how is Brian ever going to get laid if they don't lay waste to a pallet's worth of mango bubble water?"

Alana shrugs, the flush in her face going pinker with her amusement. Brian makes some sort of noise of frustration, redirects, generally provides fodder to the merit of the phrase "the lady doth protest too much."

To Alana's side, Hannibal holds what is presumably the "house white" in a plastic wine glass with the precious three-fingered grip of one who has received a gift they wish they could return, but are required to keep for at least six months as to be seen as appreciative, and give enough time in between to allow the gifter to forget that it exists.

(*"Plastic glass is an oxymoron that impresses with its obliviousness," he says shortly after having it handed to him, and you hide a biting comment about silver spooned children behind a painful swallow of beer.*)

"I believe the statistic was something to the tune of 70 percent of financial and IT workers having liaisons at some point at an office event," Hannibal says with a sly look. "Only 45 percent for the education field. Some odds are better than others tonight it seems."

Will snorts. "Counter to that, 8 out of 10 statistics are completely made up. Did you look into that just on the off-chance we *surprisingly strayed* to this topic, or does therapy really cover all aspects of the holiday blues?" he mutters.

Hannibal doesn't reply, just gives the glass in his hand a little twirl with a wry look. *Guess*, the expression says. Will guesses yes.

“Speaking of math...” Jimmy rolls his eyes skyward thoughtfully, sipping at ginger ale and whiskey. “Will’s gotta be the spoiler at the far end of a statistical median for teachers,” he says with a cheery hum. “I don’t think I’ve even seen him start a conversation before, outside of absolute necessity.”

“Kind of like therapy,” Brian snipes, and Will considers if it’s bad form to suggest that someone this concerned with what he does should seek therapy themselves for their envy issues. Any kind of envy, really - job, lifestyle, penis, et al.

Alana does her best to diffuse the situation, even if Will almost double back to tell Jimmy he’s wrong, Will’s not a median spoiler, but more of outlier from a regression line in a scatter plot that should be exempted from analysis, but that’s splitting hairs, and someone (*Beverly*) is trying to trade him for a new bottle of beer, and he’s looking at Hannibal who’s smiling with teeth again while that strange shyness is coming down on him again like he should explain, maybe they can talk about plastination in forensic cold case samples instead of whatever this is.

“It will be a cold day in hell that Will would be interested in hooking up with a coworker,” says Brian, on his fourth drink, shaking the can emblazoned with a grapefruit as though it were a mating call for cost analysts while Jimmy rocks on his feet behind him. “He can barely stand being in the same room as most of them.”

God, the universe... *something* listens to this.

Will really wishes (*he? she? they?*) wouldn’t have.

(*You apologize on the way out. You feel like you’re supposed to. Who takes their therapist to the company holiday party in lieu of literally anyone else? Hannibal doesn’t need to know about your deliberate methods of not connecting to people, even if you are predisposed to it.*)

(*He tells you not to, while you listen to the rhythm of his heels on the greenbelt path to the parking lot. “You have good boundaries, no matter what you’ve been told by Jack, or how*

you feel after closing cases. You have to, or someone will get behind them, and then where would you be?")

Incidentally, the first time Will finds himself thinking about sleeping with a co-worker, it is neither a cold day, nor in hell. It is mid-March, unseasonably pleasant, and there isn't a party, but the general population seems to have taken a keen interest in fornicating regardless of the statistical likelihood.

It is March 15th when disaster strikes.

No one can say *exactly* when it starts - if it's like most problems in Will's life, it starts at 3 in the morning, when the problem is both not entirely apparent, but disruptive to his rare opportunities to sleep, kind of akin to a burst pipe from frost, or a dog copiously vomiting on the only rug in the entire downstairs area. Maybe some noxious wind blows in from the Appalachians, or the equatorial stream sends up some hot air with a little something extra from the Florida Keys and the Carribean. Maybe God wakes up with the divine equivalent of still being drunk on margaritas from Taco Tuesday, but now it's Wish I Hadn't Done That Wednesday, and instead of cilantro floating ambivalently in the toilet bowl while one navel gazes in a sauced stupor, it's a literal foul breeze from parts unknown.

The news in Baltimore reports it first, a very glamorous woman sitting opposite of her host following the opening sequence - nothing takes precedence over it, not even the 20 car pileup on Interstate 95, which incidentally begins as a direct result of traffic relative to the morning headline.

"And good morning Baltimore!" she says with bright and shiny veneers, a little vacant in her delivery out of habit rather than a disconnect from her strange line coming over the teleprompter even now. "The time is 7:30 am, and this is your morning report with Daniel and Janet. It's Wednesday morning, and spring has sprung a week early it seems! Close the windows and break out those air purifiers, because pollen season has started early and with a bang. Locals are reporting record breaking amounts of the stuff, with some homes coated in as much as a quarter inch of it in areas nearest to greenbelts and forested areas."

“That’s right Janet,” says her co-anchor, looking notably more disturbed as the moments pass, eying Janet with not fear, but something decidedly unprofessional. “Imagine my surprise coming out of my house to get hit with a strong breeze full of pollen - can’t get it out of my clothes to save my life. It just sticks to everything!”

He laughs nervously, and raises a hand to dust his shoulders, which practically billow with pollen, and scoots his chair incrementally closer to Janet.

Janet sneezes when it finds her like an innocuous wave of impending disaster that looks harmless, as impending disaster is known to do.

“In even more bizarre news, the mystery pollen storm seems to be causing a number of flare-ups in the weekly commuter traffic, with accident reports throughout the tri-city area today. Drivers seemingly are leaving their cars to pick fights, causing entire shutdowns of major thoroughfares. We’re receiving additional but as of yet unverified stories of these same drivers..” Janey pauses, squinting at the teleprompter, and rubbing her forehead which has begun to sweat like it’s July and there’s not been a crosswind in a year, before frowning. “These same drivers are getting handsy with each other, in what appears to be spontaneous acts of…”

She stops, still smiling widely, and dabs delicately at a cheek with the cuff of her sleeve. “Ok, is a temp doing the teleprompter today?” she asks, turning to the co-anchor.

Daniel is now about half a foot away, having scooted closer with each passing vacant smile into the camera. His expression is torn somewhere between holding in noisy gas, and the hunger of one faced with an entire sheet of freshly baked cookies, truly the discomfort of the damned.

Rather than startling, Janet smiles, rubs her nose, and pushes her own chair closer before throwing herself at him directly, working at the top buttons of her blouse.

There is no deliberation. There is no hesitation - just this split-second of *why the hell not* , a very provocative shot of a brazier that is much too red to be worn for a typical Tuesday morning at the station, and then a cut to **PLEASE STAND BY** written in delicate script over an aerial shot of the Chesapeake Bay. Jazz plays, theme music generously arranged and performed by the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra.

This doesn't disappear for 30 minutes or so. Turns out the reported first round of fornicating doesn't take very long, but between the refractory period for the second, the awkwardness of asking the station anchors to remove themselves to the powder room after *that*, and the unfortunate inclusion of a third party in the arrangement when they try to pick up the discarded but still pollen laden gentleman's blazer, rumor has it the news station devolves into some sort of orgy of circumstance. Additional rumor has it someone opens the door to air things out, only to let more of the stuff in. The day is declared a holiday, the first of its kind in the news station's history.

While Daniel and Janet are certainly not the first professional relationship casualty of the day, they are cited by all the other stations as the most visible example of the phenomena, and used as a cautionary video by at least three law enforcement organizations.

By 9:30, the pollen is popularized by the name "Dammit Janet" by a radio host covering reports and forum posts about incidents related to the pollen that thinks he's very clever. It sticks, just like the pollen, and by noon the youth of New England are simultaneously sending each other captions of the unfortunate news anchors in the moments before nature strikes, while also trying to devise ways to be let out of the house to find out for themselves just what Janet is all about.

"*There's a lot of factors to Janet that we still just don't know, but we advise staying out of Janet if feasible for the duration of the event.*"

"*Janet is ravaging the eastern seaboard.*"

"*The National Institutes of Health are projecting a baby boom following this morning's spread of Janet.*"

"*Janet is an equal opportunity risk for all ages, but particularly worrisome for people with seasonal allergies, and risk of cardiac arrest.*"

"*HR is advising you avoid Janet at all costs. HR also wants to clarify that standard office hours still apply.*"

Incidentally, the census office and local county district courts start anticipating a huge number of name changes in the female-presenting population, and quietly begin building a simplified website for people seeking the appropriate documentation to get the process rolling.

Also incidentally, most establishments remain open in spite of logic, science, and general mayhem in the civil engineering of major urban city centers.

“You can’t just shut down business for something like this,” says a very self-important city councilman from the safety of his house in DC, who is the swing vote on a mandatory city-wide closure. “People have got to be able to live their lives.” There’s a puzzling number of people from county to county that make similar calls. It is later suggested that with the number of affairs conducted in public office without the assistance of Janet in the greater DC-Baltimore Metro, it likely looked like business as usual to most of the decision-making personnel anyway.

Hazmat wearing day workers for the respective Transportation departments sweep away the wreckage of accidents, while placing bets on who proposes a sex swing at Druid Hill Park first. Public exposure incidents on the train and light rail reach record highs. The breeze carries in more of the pollen, and onlookers become suspiciously willing participants, and not just because they are unfamiliar with their perpetually unused Cold War era nuclear disaster containment training. There is, however, a record number of curtain liners and rolls of duct tape purchased by those who remember reading *something* about that at some point in the 1980s.

(*Also missing from most grocery stores by the end of day: Vaseline, fancy cooking oils, and breath mints. An initial panic related to toilet paper is staved off by the suggestion of a wise, elderly shelf stocker that it’s actually hotter to not clean up in between rounds, and is apparently taken at face value by affected individuals who are barely holding it together long enough to clear the cashier’s counter and find an orifice. Neighboring stores communicate the same tactic long enough to call in assistance from neighboring unaffected counties, and everyone’s behind remains clean in an unanticipated twist to the circumstances.*)

This is how Will Graham finds himself still being called into the FBI Headquarters, because apparently analyzing serial killing can’t take a self-care day to figure out if antihistamines work on whatever demonic plant sent the Wrath of Janet. This is how Hannibal Lecter finds

himself wearing his kill suit in broad daylight, accepting any and all last minute appointment cancellations, and planning to run interference.

March 15th dawns for Will Graham with the brand of horror usually reserved for family events, or shooting someone, or maybe getting stabbed.

(*They all involve a particular brand of stomach turning itself over that you associate with trauma, the kind you should probably be discussing with your therapist.*)

Hannibal, while never one to shame for hysterics, will later tell him he's perhaps being a bit dramatic. As a person once inclined to describing rooms as having the character of screams being lacquered into them from floorboard to wainscotting, Will thinks maybe Hannibal's not as observant as he's been led to believe, and is not familiar with Will after all.

This is before he even hears that the pollen is causing the population to participate in sexual congress all willy-nilly, if one can pardon the expression.

Will, living in the countryside as long as he has, is better prepared than most for the realities of pollen season. He insists on avoiding as much of it as he can altogether, but even he doesn't have a plan for when the pollen is more akin to a light snowfall than the native flora's attempts to propagate. If the snow had been industriously dyed yellow, anyways - the Easter marshmallow bird yellow, not the pleasant pale buttery kind, but fortunately *also* not the dark-haven't-drank-water-in-a-week yellow. Insofar as this, mercies have been dispensed by whatever self-satisfied deity has seen fit to cover the greater tri-city area with the stuff.

He looks out the window. A puff of golden pollen swirls with the breeze.

Will's first thought upon seeing this: *Tree pollen season is here early*.

With this comes irritation. Next, inconvenience. Riding on that, the frustration of needing to drive to DC if the series of text messages on his phone is any indicator. He looks down to his

cell phone, and up again to the miserable air outside.

Jack Crawford to Group: Pollen apocalypse or not, lab staff and Will to meet at 10:00 sharp. Reviewing an old Ripper kill before the body is interred.

Will sighs.

He goes to the bathroom, grabs the nearest box of over the counter nasal decongestant, and goes to great pains to cover his face with a painting respirator before industriously dusting off his vehicle. He changes clothes once this is complete. He ignores at least three of the dogs participating in what looks to be a fabulous hump train after they perform their business outside while he works at cleaning up the windows of his car.

He entertains the idea of calling out. He thinks it would sound something like "Sorry about the last-minute decision! Allergies are tantamount to the worst of things to ever happen in human biology, even against my empathy disorder. Sure, disassociating is terrible, but has your throat ever been sore for two months?"

"Yes, it absolutely is earth-shattering to not have a grasp on your personal sense of likes and dislikes next to your roommates, but have you ever had to annex parts of the apartment that you're fairly certain there's something growing inside of?"

"Of course, high school was a nightmare land where acceptance is more important than maintaining a healthy emotional distance from minor conversations only you will remember and cringe over in 20 years, but consider the frustration of eczema around the nose."

(*You have more examples, but there's only so much grandiose speculation one can make about the reactivity of your immune system before people start thinking that not only are you debilitatingly empathic, but probably manic-obsessive about histaminic reactions, and that's not really helping your stable adult argument much.*)

Will doesn't text any of this in return, but it's certainly tempting. He tightens the respirator mask, checking the filters, and sees himself in the mirror of the hall bathroom. He thinks he

looks like a total dumbass, but he will be a dumbass with the most pristine sinuses of anyone within 20 miles of his person.

On the north side of the Potomac and Patapsco rivers, nestled in the tall rise of townhouses and business towers, the day starts much less obviously terribly for Hannibal Lecter, but only by merit of the adage “forewarned is forearmed.”

(*You shudder to think of the consequences of grabbing the daily paper on the doorstep before looking into the noxious dusting of cadmium yellow. Not that you aren’t in control of yourself, indeed, you are very much so, but because if everyone else is enjoying themselves carnally, you don’t know if you’d see a reason to not do the same if the urge is really that strong. It’s nice to get to decide for yourself; pansexuality is hardly a greenlight for everything and everyone.*)

He is an early riser by disposition, but the sort to keep the curtains drawn until the sun is fully up - hindsight being what it is, Hannibal wishes he had the foresight to watch for the radical transformation of the landscape during the wee hours of the morning. It’s perhaps the closest he’ll ever get to seeing one of the Biblical Plagues sweep across Pharoah’s Egypt of old, though the irony of it creating a huge number of first-borns instead of killing them is not lost on him.

So when he opens the drapes promptly at 7:00 am, approximately 30 minutes after sunrise, Hannibal is not sure at first if the day is going to be very abnormally sunny, or if there’s been a terrible incident at a local industrial plant. But no, there’s no one in the streets showing signs of anaphylaxis or suffocation from the dusting, and while there is some distant wailing of sirens from the general direction of downtown, his neighbors appear to be having a lively discussion on the stoop of the home across the street from him, gesturing at the ground and trees with the general frustration of one who’s found their favorite pear tree covered in trash. Nearby, a gardener minds the hedgerows.

Hannibal turns an eye to his Bentley, parked at the curb in front of his home - it’s fortunate that it is a distinct shape. His first thought upon seeing it is: *I have never regretted the purchase of a black car as much as I do right now.*

(*Also not entirely true: there is a trip to the wedding of a colleague out in Sparrows Point off of the Chesapeake Bay, wherein the guests have a lovely time in the clubhouse and on the golf links, and the local seagull population has an even better time in the guest parking where an entire truck's worth of popcorn for the after party is unceremoniously dumped in the lot. While your car does not have the misfortune of being the closest to the wreckage, it is still well within range of a seagull's impressive ability to defecate with force. And they do.*)

He looks back up to his neighbors, who are no longer having a lively discussion.

Barring Carnivale, a research trip to Amsterdam in the mid 90s, and some questionable parties he attended in his first years in the States, his second thought is that Hannibal is certain he's never seen two pairs of breasts find their way out before morning coffee faster than theirs have on a weekday in Baltimore.

Good for them, he thinks, amused and scandalized the way that one is when a beloved pet has brought them a gently chewed shoe and thinking he should look away quickly, *truly life is delightful. I do wish they started **inside** the foyer rather than out.*

Then the gardener joins them.

Hannibal goes from scandalized to distantly mortified, and itchy fingered with a need to do something about it. He closes the curtains, breathes, and checks that the front door is locked in a rare moment of uncertainty. He returns to the window, and opens the curtains back up.

A police officer has tried to break them all apart.

He appears to now be joining them as well.

Hannibal closes the curtains once more and does what one who's lived in far more drastic times does when things are going awry in the streets - he turns on a small FM radio he keeps in the storage closet, and listens in fascination at the mayhem just beginning to unfold outside.

By 9:00 am, he is no closer to being dressed for the day, but he does know that the city and surrounding areas are covered in what seems to be an aphrodisiac plant matter, and not on the level that oysters, or chocolate, or alcohol can be. It is far more severe than that, if the foursome currently occurring across the street is indicative of anything.

(*You reluctantly check, thinking that surely someone will have objected loudly by now, only to discover that they've made a tiny enclave behind the not quite large enough meyer lemons on either side of the door.*)

The pollen makes quick work of his clients too it seems. His 10 o'clock calls to cancel. She's gotten back together with her ex-husband, and seems to be literally so judging by the background noise, but still, Hannibal's policy doesn't provide forgiveness for no-shows, and Ms. Koenig has enough presence of mind to call in with the most sincere of apologies and what sounds to be severe nasal congestion.

"Thank you for your consideration?" he says, gut reaction to be offended, but feeling the need to be merciful. One doesn't plan for sex pollen when confirming appointments, patient and doctor alike, so one can hardly be upset that it's happened.

"*So-so-so-sorry-see-you-next week-I-think-Doctor-Lecterrrrr*," she replies, and reaches some sort of fevered end to the call, though it unfortunately isn't by hanging up.

Hannibal hopes her ex-husband doesn't take it personally that it's her psychiatrist's name that finishes that whole experience up. He stares at his phone in what can only be described as shell shock, if the shell is the crest of orgasm, and the shock is how early in the morning he's had to hear it, not technically be at all involved, and have to go on with his day like that's not going to make a very strange appointment in seven days time.

(*Assuming Ms. Koenig doesn't quietly die of embarrassment, or of suffocation after all. Nobody's really sure of the pollen's side effects as of 9:32 am other than the profound need to copulate, though you mentally amend that sinus irritation is likely.*)

Flattering. Terrible. Uncouth. This is not how he envisioned Wednesday going at all, or that he would be on the more conservative end of the Pollen End Times.

He goes to shower, because some semblance of routine must be followed, and to the best of his abilities tries to seal himself into his vinyl protective suit until he can figure out exactly *how* potent this aggressively sexual pollen is. He cancels his remaining appointments, with exception of Will who he cannot get a hold of.

Hannibal thinks about this - what fun it would be to laugh about all of this at the end of the day, two people who are above such follies, but at this stage, can he say that with any certainty? Is his sour-faced friend as good at creating forts against the destructive force of plants who are absolutely hellbent on germinating the eastern seaboard? He certainly can picture Will with his own kill suit with elasticized cuffs for proper sterile doffing between crime scenes, but it's not very *likely* that he actually has one.

Where does this Wednesday morning find you, amidst all the destruction? He texts, trying at casual, and landing somewhere between Miltonian and etiquette school. Hannibal sends it anyway, as he's not one to self-edit beyond forensic and circumstantial practicality, and goes in search of another vinyl protective suit.

If anyone asks, he was planning to paint and wanted help.

The reply he receives some twenty minutes later is extremely alarming.

It finds me in DC, looking at orifices against my will. You?

Hannibal's forced to go southwards for a clear freeway ramp, working his way towards the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. He supposes there's no helping inconveniences in rare circumstances as these, but he wishes perhaps that on this occasion that it was a little less of a time sink.

Saving friends from the amorous intentions of malignant vernal microgametophytes was not in the schedule for the day, but so it goes.

There's a few benefits to this diversion. Chiefly, it is a good opportunity to observe the collateral damage from a mostly secure position, the air filters having recently been changed in the car cabin, and no need for extraneous protective gear as long as the recirculation is working as intended. The neighbors get tired eventually, and seem to snap out of it long enough to retreat to the inside of the house, though Hannibal guesses the officer will decline to submit a report for the disturbance, other than to say there was in fact something disturbed. The streets are largely clear in the residential neighborhoods, banks of the pollen left untouched. In an upscale area of town such as his, this is to be expected - the wealthy have always had an unfair advantage in evading plague and pestilence, though Hannibal would hazard a guess that some will deliberately roll in the stuff as a dog rolls in a competitors scat to hide their trail. A literal golden opportunity to sleep with as many people as possible, a second Shrove Tuesday for the citizens of the afflicted cities. Hannibal, not religious but god fearing in some respects, smiles at the idea, and the secure crinkling of the vinyl suit.

It's rather beautiful, he thinks off-handedly, the Baltimore Basilica to his right as he drives down the street, letting the breeze do it's work on the exterior of the car rather than risk handling it unnecessarily. (*Your supply of nitrile gloves is disproportionate to your actual need for them, impromptu illegal surgeries and autopsies aside. You can waste a few, but why?*) All bright and destructive, floating in long waves between the budding of pear and apple trees at the sides of the streets, gathering in marbled waves on the street run-off. Basilica of the Assumption, if he recalls correctly, first of its kind in the United States, and one of the few draws to the city's architecture for him.

He sits at the intersection before the entrance to its narthex, where on either side the bells chime out the hour of destruction. It's 11 o'clock, and the world isn't quite ending, inconveniences aside, but it is changed, and the vessel of its transformation billows from the twin belfries of the Basilica in vibrant waves. The air is hazy with it, blue gone almost green with its abundance, shaking from chiming brass.

Hannibal wonders at what fate he'll arrive at in DC. He wonders what he'll do with it when he gets there, if this is even the sort of thing one gets to manipulate into the shapes that please them most.

(*You don't deny yourself anything. Why would you deny yourself this chance? You like to pretend that you can look down from a high place, and that Will Graham will be standing next to you doing the same, but you're just as trapped by your impulses and your wants as the next person, and what is this if not an unexpected catalyst.*)

(*It doesn't shame you to desire a person, but it shames you to think of his choosing the same out of random caprice instead of choice. Sex isn't holy. Natural synchronicity is, and you are a devout believer with no room for the faults of every other person who breathes the air today.*)

Will arrives at the FBI Headquarters at 10:13 am. He would have arrived earlier, but the traffic is terrible, and everyone seems to need to hug it out. Not in the habit of making eye contact on principle, he does his best to ignore the decidedly inconvenient number of cars pulled to the side of the road, hazard lights flashing, windows very foggy even amidst the sunny day and dancing yellow breezes.

(*Everytime an air current rushes the side of your car, you feel your entire face tighten up in anticipation of a sneeze despite the respirator mask. You wish you had goggles. Would anyone even notice if you were wearing them? Where* ***is*** *everyone?*)

The employee parking garage is surprisingly lightly populated, as are the walkways, front entry, and hallways. He notes with satisfaction that both people at the reception desk in the atrium leading to the interior labs are wearing masks and safety goggles, though they periodically glance at each other in suspicion and keep a container of sanitary wipes at the middle point of their shared space.

"Not a fan of pollen either?" Will asks, signing in.

"Not this kind," says the younger of the two, a college-aged intern with shifty eyes. "Did you hear about the pileup in Baltimore this morning? Couldn't even take the light tram, the thing was a biohazard by the time the first commuter train came through. Don't even know if they were able to clear enough people off to even hose it down."

Will nods, adjusting the straps on his respirator. "If it's not the traffic, it's the weather," he says vaguely, and makes his way to the back.

He checks his phone in the elevator. He sees a missed call, and a text from Hannibal - very unusual at this hour, especially with no corresponding attempts by Jack or Alana.

Where does this Wednesday morning find you, amidst all the destruction? it asks, and Will smiles unseen at the image of Hannibal sitting in his office chair, the same expression and mode of speech he discusses murders with being used for an early spring superbloom.

It finds me in DC, looking at orifices against my will. You? he replies, referring to the body that he's been summoned to contemplate - missing every other tooth, the tongue, and the soft palate towards the back of the throat.

Will doesn't really think any more about it than that. Will hasn't listened to talk show radio in over a decade. He doesn't really listen to most people in general, or the strange, absent-minded pleasantries traded at security checkpoints, and everyone's mutual agreement to treat the pollen storm as a dire threat to the respiratory health of the institute a welcome change from the ostracization he had been anticipating with his apocalyptic headwear for the day.

The first thing that clues him into today being unusual is walking into the lab, wherein Jimmy and Brian are practicing some absolutely wild acrobatics with the rolling metal gurney, a bottle of ultrasound transmission gel, and an endocavity scope that was intended for entirely different purposes. Both are bare-faced, masks discarded to the side, and have a remarkable lack of concern for Will's entrance to the room. They are also quite naked.

Yet another orifice is presented that he looks at against his will.

"What the absolute fuck," he whispers. It sounds more like a swamped engine through the plastic and filters of his mask, but is loud enough to catch Jimmy's attention anyway.

The tech turns to look, seemingly unbothered by the current positioning of his body, Brian continuing onwards like this is as normal as getting coffee between filling out forms. Maybe it is - Will considers that he doesn't know his co-workers all that well, but that this is undoubtedly a misuse of government property.

"Oh, good morning Will!"

Will's phone buzzes. He ignores it. Jimmy and Brian do too, up until Beverly Katz comes into the room wielding a spray bottle of what seems to be soapy water like the hero of a sci-fi film, shaming everyone as she goes with the certainty of one scolding a cat. She spares no one, not even Will, who has done nothing but apparently can't prove it, so the soapy water it is.

At first, Will doesn't believe the explanation at all. Having been the butt of one too many jokes from elementary school to his present day career, he is *not* going to be the one that accepts what amounts to extreme seasonal allergies as a valid excuse for workplace indecency, commuter traffic, and the unfortunate surplus of allergens floating around. It's a lot of pollen, but the pulmonary system isn't even set up to boot the biological hard drive and open the hidden porn folder, as it were, and if he can make that comparison.

"Pull the other one," he says, wiping soapy water from the inside of his ventilator mask, but only once Beverly gives them the all clear.

"Will, I'm serious," Beverly says, nodding very earnestly. "This Janet stuff is totally rocking five counties. I saw it on the news this morning - people are literally having impromptu sex in the streets when they get too much of this stuff in the system."

"Janet?" he says a little breathlessly. Sounds familiar - he frowns.

"Yeah, that's what they're calling it, said so on the news. I don't think that's the official CDC title, but it's definitely the one that's going on all the headlines."

" *Do* we trust things that we see on the news?" asks Will idly, turning the mask to and fro, eagle-eyed for any sign of the pollen. He may not believe in sex pollen, but he does believe in sinusitis and watery eyes.

Beverly rolls her eyes. Behind her, Jimmy and Brian have returned. Jimmy seems refreshed by a trip to the locker room showers, but Brian's a little sheepish. On one hand, Will thinks that they *should* be sheepish, and on the other hand, he's not entirely certain they didn't just continue what they were doing in the showers. He fully intends to avoid any and all colon health checks until the retinal burn from the misuse of the lab scope fades.

(*So maybe never have one again, you think. You don't think you can disentangle the phrase "now cough" without returning to this moment in horror and astonishment.*)

Brian's incredulous embarrassment starts giving way to irritation at Will's speculation. "Do you just not pay attention to anything and the profiling has all been for shits and giggles? It made us fuck like rabbits!"

"With the scope," Will dryly adds.

"With the scope *after* the initial fucking like rabbits," Jimmy adds cheerily, if a little red around the neck where the lab coat and collared shirt can't quite hide the flush. Will feels his own cheeks pinking at the idea.

"Well *that's* hardly evidence of it being the pollen," Will mutters, rubbing his eyes like there's nothing he'd like to do so much as press her face into one of the morgue's refrigerators and slam the door repeatedly closed than listen to this farcical cover-up. From his side, in a rebuke reminiscent of a sunday school teacher, Beverly tells him to not rub his eyes, that's a vector of transmission, or is this Will's first time in a (*once, before this morning anyway*) sterile lab?

"What do you mean by that?" Brian huffs, while Jimmy pulls out several bags of swabs, gone neon yellow with saline for the Roush machine.

Will watches this with a greater respect than he's had for the majority of the events this morning thus far - evidence and data are things he can work with. Evidence and data are nowhere near as likely to compromise work surfaces with foreign dna samples.

(*You cringe at the thought that perhaps lab technicians and law enforcement handling case samples are excluded not because there's a statistical chance of them leaving trace evidence, but instead that they may very well be fornicating next to microscopes, and there's probably a public hair sneaking in with the crime scene trace evidence because the coroner's are into each other.*)

"Is that the pollen?" he asks, a little unnecessarily. Of course it's the goddamn pollen, he thinks. "Is this the part of the movie where we watch it start evolving into a tentacle monster or something, if only it can find enough resources to consume? *Where* is Jack?"

"Don't give it any ideas," Beverly says lowly, opening one of the bags. "He's at home, if you can believe that. Something about reconciling with Bella and not being one to leave problems in the marriage bed, which probably means they left one of the windows open sometime between his first text and mine."

Will rubs the space between his brows, vaguely resentful of the day. He could have stayed home. He could have taped off the air intakes at his house to make sure he has at least one sensible, pollen free place to hide until whatever aggressive pine, cedar, or box elder sent this wave of idiocy is done fulfilling its evolutionary purpose.

"Should we be handling that?" he asks suspiciously. "Since you seem convinced the side effects are sexual depravity and curiosity over object insertion. Nobody here is really an expert in infectious disease."

"Your words, not mine," she rejoins, turning one of the wet swabs in a gloved hand, pulling her mask back on just in case. Technically, the saline solution should make it inert unless she wants to stick it into herself, but with how the day is going, Will would hazard the guess that all bets are off. "It does seem to make people act on their impulses though... Kind of unclear to what extent, and if it can overcome aversion to kinks, seeing as no one seems to be declaring what their hard stops are."

"Am I to understand that your concern is that you want people to consent to their exploratory use of exploratory lab hardware?"

Brian snorts from across the counter, turning red again.

“I want to know just in case. I’m not into butt stuff,” she replies blithely.

This makes Will snort and turn just as red. This is all more than he ever wanted to know about his co-workers. He is absolutely convinced that it would take more than rogue pollen to make him want to sleep with the lab staff. Will is further convinced and certain as a rock that it would take more than that for him to suddenly be party to something outside his kink wheelhouse. Allergies are a nuisance, not a homeopathic viagra for God’s sake.

As a person who routinely feels impulses to axe-murder people, regardless if it’s his original thought or not, WIll sincerely hopes the impulse theory is not true, and everyone’s just decided to hell with moral scruples, today is the day we resolve all the sexual tension across the board, and the pollen is just circumstantial. Axe-murdering isn’t a kink by most standards, and while his standards are bendy on a good day, he would like to keep them at least mostly on the up and up.

For the better part of an hour, despite absolutely no background in molecular biology and botany, the staff of the Behavioral Sciences Unit uses their hours and salary to browse the internet for incoming news, make dire plans for if this is going to be a new normal, and debate if a swab taken orally or rectally would prompt the same immune response as breathing it in, which is to say the immune response of seeking out opportunities to penetrate each other for the joy of penetration.

(*“If this is the new normal, I suspect the human population will not only endure, but come back in greater numbers than ever seen before,” says Brian, a little more fervent than is needed. You assure him that the Chesapeake Bay and Potomac River are hardly representative of the globe, and that the majority of Europe seems to think the news of this incident is an inside joke shared between Americans instead of a superspreader event for STDs, amongst other things to spread.*)

(*If any of this was real anyway.*)

Will just really wants to leave. This is not the orifice talk that he was promised. Classes at Quantico are cancelled for the day, as relayed in an email that comes a bit late to Will's inbox, so he's not missing that per se, but the whole day is shaping up to be a bit too similar to getting into a debate with a religious aunt of his that he sends holiday cards to, but has actively avoided being in the same room with since some time in the late 90s. As with her, there's only one good way to stop the entire thing - reality relayed in as unkind of terms as possible.

He hates letting people wallow in delusions.

(*Except yourself* .)

"Look," he says, wincing against the thought. "If I rub some of the pollen in my face and I continue to hold my title as least approachable professor on the federal payroll, can we drop this entire conversation and I can head back home?"

"Did you miss the part where it made us fuck each other?" asks Brian, incredulous.

"I did in fact see that you were fucking each other, but I see less the part where it *made* you do that, and more of the part where there was perhaps a rare moment in time where no one would question it any further if you did. Weren't you already in the lab?" Will asks waspishly. "Isn't the whole concept predicated on the wild need to fuck immediately?"

Jimmy and Brian have no forthcoming answer for that, other than a mumbled "it was on my jacket" from Jimmy. Will wonders if Jimmy's jacket also has a bridge for him to sell in the pockets. Beverly just looks at the two of them like she's going to hit them with another round of soap water, as though there's something to wash off of them.

(*You are a good profiler. You are also not blind.*)

"So, rectal or oral?" asks Jimmy, clearing his throat.

What a question for the day.

Will feels himself die a little inside. “Uh, neither. There’s a perfectly good courtyard in this building to get some more that hasn’t been soaked. I’d hate to hear my sacrifice being ignored for changing the variables of the experiment.”

“And you’re not at all bothered by the possibility of wanting to bone one of us?” asks Beverly, hands on her hips, but smiling anyway.

“Aren’t you more concerned I might want to bone you?” Will replies, avoiding her gaze.

She smiles. “Would hate to miss the boat,” she laughs, but Will feels a bit of relief that it’s not the nervous kind, just Beverly rolling with the punches.

Will nods. “I believe it was decided that it would be a cold day in hell that I would want to, and it seems like a nice spring day,” he says, tipping his head up, leaning against a table. “That being said, my participation fee is a year’s supply of antihistamines. Just because I’m not worried about wanting to sleep with people doesn’t mean I don’t dislike pollen, and reasonable compensation is expected in clinical trials.”

“Anything for science,” Beverly says with a jaunty wink and a hand raised to shake on it.

For a government facility that orients itself to secrecy and knowledge, tale of Will’s volunteering to be the next victim of the pollen makes the rounds in record time. Will would suspect Brian of telling someone as he has shown a tendency towards in the past, but he’s been in his company for most of the morning, and Will walking without his respirator clear up to the courtyard nearest to his favorite vending machine and coffee maker is probably enough to make most people run for the hills.

Or place bets - he’s pretty sure he saw money change hands.

God forbid he approach them with the intent to know them biblically. They might even find that they like it, he thinks irritably with an ambitious confidence that he doesn't actually feel.

(*"There's no accounting for taste," Hannibal says, and you agree, a wild element that sometimes even you don't know what to do with.*)

He puts his mask back on. He steps outside.

It really is a nice day, were it not for the copious amounts of yellow covering everything. It shines ominously, the gentle albedo of something reflective but soft. The green leaves beneath it are unharmed and unfurling with the season, and the aging heads of red camellia flowers in the shade of the north wall wink from beneath them all, fallen to the ground.

From the windows and the doors, people watch - word spreads fast, and Will can't hear their murmuring, but he can feel their eyes, growing wider and upset when he sighs into the respirator before pulling it off his face again. The blood rushes back into the creases pressed into his cheeks, and the bridge of his nose. It smells of humidity, and damp soil, and what is probably the sweetness of whatever overambitious plant turned the world mad for the last few hours.

He puts a hand to a nearby bush - it's sticky, almost resinous against the pads of his fingers, staining them. Will hesitates looking down at them, the little whorls shiny and pressing desperately against each other, but irrevocably his own skin and unaroused in the face of itself.

Here goes nothing , thinks Will.

He takes a long breath in, and because it is pollen, even if it is potentially *special* , he coughs and sneezes like he's opened up an entire box of asbestos surprise, straight from the insulation of the no doubt carcinogenic building.

There's a pause where he can feel the anticipation, greasy handed and watching, little cloth masks and clicking respirators against the glass. The janitorial staff will have a difficult weekend removing forehead imprints from the walls, once they've gotten over the initial shock and disgust at what the rest of the building has been up to in the name of Janet.

Nothing. No sudden need to disrobe, no consideration of sticking his dick in the nearest drainage pipe. He eyes it speculatively, just to be sure, but it still looks like a good way to get tetanus instead of a way to get off.

He coughs again. It's what he expected, but he's still not sure how he feels about it.

(*You're different. You always have been. This is just another way you are. You don't believe in magic fairy dust, or magic fuck dust as the case may be, and all the rest of them look on because they think you are just so beyond the standard model that anything you do will be an outlier.*)

He shrugs, and raises his hand to the door he knows Beverly is behind, nothing but a shadow in the reflective silver of it. He feels totally normal - not the vaguest increase of his heartbeat, or heat at the collar of his shirt, or what he supposes would be tightness in his pants. He's about as aroused as a person about to attend a funeral feels.

Well, most people anyway.

"I'm *fine* ," he stresses, and very nearly points to the seam line of his pants to illustrate, but that's a bit much even for him.

They let him back in, masks on their faces, watching as he goes back into the Behavioral Science facilities.

(*You are surprised to not be relieved. You are surprised to be disappointed. You would have liked to be party to the kind of happy madness a crowd feels, instead of the insular, solitary kind you've been told is valuable to protect other people from.*)

In what is either a curse or a blessing, God, the universe, the timeless call of the void, whatever, sees fit to not let Will just put his respirator back on and sneeze in peace as all good men do in the face of ragweed. He doesn't want to complain, as he has a few hundred dollars worth of name brand over the counter drugs coming his way that will see him through to the seeding season in October, but his eyes burn like he has a fever, and there's nothing he'd like to do so much as run a hot shower and pray to the forces that be.

Given his recent exposure, Jimmy, Brian, and Beverly all insist that he sit for at least another thirty minutes, just to make sure he's not going to spontaneously combust, or maybe present with testicular torsion as a result of having zero sex drive in the face of the alleged sex pollen. Will rolls his eyes, has a seat, and privately groans that he was avoiding this outcome specifically.

And because the events of the day could be a curse or a blessing, and chaos theory is obviously in play, Hannibal Lecter comes striding through the door with a visitor's badge, a respirator of similar quality and size to Will's, and what is probably the most fitted version of a painting onesie that Will has ever laid eyes on.

"Where do you even get something like that made?" he says, mystified by the reflective clear vinyl, looking at it rather than Hannibal. There's a black suit underneath, with black shirt and tie, like he's just come back from a spy operation, or perhaps performing a hit. Will admires how tidy it would be - no clothing fibers, no pesky blood splatter.

Beverly looks up from her microscope, turning pollen from Will's hand on a new swab, comparing against the ones she had prior. (*"To make sure you didn't cheat!" she frowns, but not in a mean way. "I'm going to end up on a watch list for meth production if I buy all that epinephrine at once for you, you know. Pray for my security clearance."*)

"Doctor Lecter," she says. "What drags you from Baltimore to DC? Not enough wild sex in that city, so you thought you'd check how we were holding up?"

"Will mentioned something about examining orifices, and I thought I'd make my medical license useful in the absence of meaningful appointments today," his mouth turning down into a polite grimace. "They are all rather...high risk individuals, as I'm sure you may

understand, but I'm seeing that everyone in the room appears to be alive and clothed, and perhaps I needn't make the drive."

"Surface streets from Downtown to DC?" asks Jimmy. "Woof. Could never be me."

Hannibal nods, and it's this that breaks Will's focus on the shine of the fluorescents on his shoulder rather than his story.

Will almost asks him if he's going to insist on continuing the Sexy Ides of March lie, but instead he catches his eyes, and feels for a moment like he's going to throw up because literal butterflies have developed in his stomach and they are trying to escape through every available exit.

He sneezes again.

"Gesundheit," Hannibal replies with a half-smile. "Best be careful with that, Will. People will think you're armed and dangerous with how things are playing out today."

"Will is blessed with the happy disposition of one who will survive the colonization of Mars as a frontiersman regardless of world events," Jimmy nods, blowing his nose into a cheery red handkerchief. (*"Bloody noses make me woozy," he explains when you stare at it. As a medically licensed forensic examiner who probably sees a literal ton of blood annually, you wonder how he ever made it to this point in his career.*) "He knows how to woodwork, he knows how to hunt and fish, and I think given the opportunity, he'd probably use deadly force on a person trying to trespass on his property."

"He also appears to be completely immune to the pollen," Brian says resentfully, arms crossed.

Hannibal gives a strange surprised smile at that idea - Will sees it, and feels even stranger than he did moments before, like he might pass out, or have a panic attack. He's had a few in his day, but never because someone smiled, even if he does catalogue Hannibal's smiles like someone catalogues birds they see on holiday, fleeting, probably not to be seen again.

From his own crossed arms, he feels his hands shaking beneath the folds of his shirt, clenched like he can hold the earth together.

Hannibal, never one to lean into tables, shoulders and posture impeccable, instead turns to look over the sample swabs that click against their test tubes as he lifts them. “Impressive,” he says. “I would hardly believe the phenomena was real myself had I not seen a rather...exciting use of a front entryway this morning, no pun intended.”

Pun very much intended , Will thinks affectionately, and squints his eyes closed, face burning hot.

Beverly snorts. “Will walked in on Jimmy and Brian,” she says while the two of them squawk in the background. “He thinks that was less pollen and more personal inclination, but as a person who literally shoved the stuff in his face and didn’t do anything other than what I’d expect from a person with a regular mold sensitivity, I’m thinking Will may not be the best litmus for this.”

Hannibal nods, but looks satisfied by that, as if that makes any sense. Will’s face is practically molten, it’s so warm now - he can’t open his eyes without the feeling in his gut coming back.

“Exceptional resilience,” says Hannibal. “As always.”

Apparently praise is the final straw, and Will’s curiosity gets the better of him, even as he grits his teeth to the point of his teeth physically hurting him. He opens his eyes to look at Hannibal, who is looking away again at the evidence bag in his hand, and all he can think is *how calm he is, how good he looks no matter the circumstance, how good it feels for someone to speak to my competency, my strength when everyone acts like I wouldn’t know how to use it if it was handed to me.*

He thinks he’s on fire. He thinks maybe this is what a severe allergic reaction feels like, and maybe he should ask for an epipen, but he wants to still be strong, so instead he sinks behind the nearest solid object that obstructs him from view before anyone can ask what’s wrong.

Oh my god, why , Will thinks, hiding behind a supply cabinet, fingers pressed to the cold steel of the doors, where inside hides swabs, forceps, suture wire, hundreds of little tools used to look inside people. He's in many ways another one, meant to be used on others, but never inwards to himself. But even Will, normally unaffected by the presence of others, has to admit to the fluttering in his chest, the burning in the pit of his stomach, and the crushing need to cross the room and crawl inside Hannibal Lecter like he can live there.

Hopefully carnally, as this particular spring calls for. 'Tis the season.

(*It got you. You wanted to not be above it, and you wanted to not be separate for once, and you aren't. What will Hannibal think when he finds out your resilience isn't exceptional after all? Your boundaries are sand on a high beach, and you never planned for a wave tall enough to break them, counting on people to stay nearer to surf, but here it comes, and you're blinking into the rush of it, watching it wash away.*)

He's embarrassed to instead run to the door like he's on fire, down the hall, completely breathless and unencumbered by people parting like the Red Sea at his bare face and wild look. He thinks someone might try to stop him, the squeak of a nitrile glove not unfamiliar but also not special in a place like here, but he can't make eye contact for fear of what that means.

Hay fever is bullshit. Janet is bullshit. Facing personal adversity instead of someone else's is most certainly the worst kind of them all.

Rose Tint My World

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There's an awkward moment in the lab that everyone takes in the silence after the mad scramble of Will's feet and the slammed door. The tension is that of having watched someone run from a lecture with the express intention to be violently ill - ponderous, a tiny bit sympathetic, largely glad that it isn't *them*.

Hannibal absently thinks about the last time Will had a physical - probably the agent exam that he ultimately failed. His blood pressure must really be something.

All the same, Will's exit is unfortunate as it is telling in its immediacy. He's probably hurt himself in the attempt as well. Hannibal's fairly confident that in addition to waving off his hand, the other man shoulder-checked himself against the doorframe with some force, and will likely be sporting an impressive bruise in its wake, but even this doesn't deter Will from leaving the space with a haste typically reserved for diarrhea or realizing you are in the wrong line at the DMV and they just called your number, red-faced and vaguely horrified as the seconds tick by.

He really wishes Will would worry less.

(*You catch his eyes, and they are the fervor-filled glossy kind that he casts on murders and depravity, tasting them like smoke left from a match. They are also the kind that you are accustomed to seeing in clinical rotations as severe conjunctivitis and rhinitis, but as he is looking at you, you prefer to edit more towards the oracular blue-eyed monster of the BAU, and less so towards the farmhouse dwelling man who is apparently subject to extreme pollen sensitivity, sexual proclivities resulting to exposure yet to be discussed.*)

So you're not immune, Hannibal thinks, satisfaction concealed under publicly appropriate doctorly concern, and the shield of his respirator, *you're selective*.

The drive to DC is a wild success by that metric, even if there's at least three burning wreckages with people having very dramatic fire-lit sex in front of them, one road rage incident that stops nearly the entirety of the city of Laurel's traffic in what is enemies-to-friends-to-lovers in record time, and having to stave off the attentions of someone walking the stop and go traffic for willing volunteers. (*Not on a Wednesday, sadly*.) Despite all this, he did manage to catch Will while the pollen was still active, untouched by his co-workers and the general staff of the J. Edgar Hoover Building, an impressive feat in that Will is an attractive man no matter his mode of dress being akin to a retired bass angler in the Gulf of Mexico.

It's gratifying - Will can't be bothered with anyone *living*, up until he suddenly can. That it is Hannibal that crosses this bridge is cause enough for the expenditure of petrol. The folly of man occurring just outside the car windows with genital emphasis is just an unexpected Freudian bonus.

Left behind: Will's FBI agent badge and his cell phone, and probably a large helping of his emotional security. The image of his red, terrified face - not from pursuit, save the kind he imagines. It would be lovelier as the seconds before the crest of pleasure, but Hannibal's a patient man.

The badge's edge is slightly powdered from his assumed trip outside, testament to his foolhardy attempt to prove his impermeability to human vice - Hannibal swipes a thumb over it, intrigued by the oily sheen of the yellow streaks left behind. However, Will's wallet and his car keys which he is accustomed to fiddling with in his trouser pockets when nervous are absent, and likely had never taken them out to begin with.

(*You have found this to be both irritating and charming in its obviousness, something to release social tension when Will can't quite find the right words, or more accurately the right tone - he certainly knows what words he'd* ***like*** *to say, and you'd* ***like*** *to hear them, but he never seems to believe you. You pointed it out once, mid-session, when you catch him evading the truth. "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all," Will singsongs, house key to car key to padlock key grinding in his hand just as he ground his teeth mere seconds ago, hidden behind the lab cabinets.*)

So depending on how distressed he is, he's probably gone for the day.

Hannibal rolls his shoulders, vinyl squeaking in protest.

"So…" Brian begins, "...delayed reaction? Inevitable nervous breakdown? Third coffee coming on a little bit stronger than usual?"

"Hard to say," Jimmy Price says, with an air of someone far more concerned with answering that question than finding out if his co-worker is about to proposition the parking garage attendant, tapping a ballpoint pen against the table top. Doubtful, considering Will's resistance to any and all association with his co-workers up to this point, but Hannibal feels strangely offended on his behalf anyway. "It's not like Will is an ideal study candidate - he just happened to be a willing one, for what was probably the first time in his life. He'd be disqualified in a traditional clinical screening process, but we're operating on emergency approval."

"Or the caprice of the man who just had official government equipment somewhere near his kidneys for the joie de vivre of it," Brian mutters, as though he wasn't personally involved in the events described. Cognitive dissonance is truly a thing of beauty.

Hannibal partitions that comment off from the rest to never be examined again, and adjusts the elastic at his ears.

"I think that's rather missing the point, Mr. Price, but I do suspect Will isn't entirely immune to the effects of today's calamity, irregular clinical subject or otherwise," Hannibal says with a look back to the door, hand warm from where it held Will's shoulder. A few small specks of yellow stick to the blue of the nitrile gloves from the badge - stars on a daytime sky.

(*You should change them. Something unsavory is on them. Something that has you strolling around the literal organization that would like nothing more than to put you in a small cage and see how you bite, because you want to know if your favorite predator of opportunity that works in it has fallen into more of the same.*)

(*You thrill at the idea. You flex your fingers until the rubber squeaks. You leave them.*)

“Jesus, yes Jimmy, that’s besides the point,” says Beverly, walking to the windowed wall next to the door, watching Will disappear down the hall with gloved hands pressed up against the cool surface. “I’ll be damned though,” she adds, “I thought for sure he was going to get away without a problem after how much he snorted, assuming he didn’t have an asthma attack or something.”

“Club bathroom in Vegas on a Friday night levels of snorting,” Jimmy nods. “Enviable lung capacity honestly, though he looked like he had a cold after doing it. I’d be amazed if he wasn’t hopped up on the stuff for the rest of the day.” He thinks for a moment. “We really ought to keep O2 in here.”

“And bells inside the morgue freezers while we’re at it?” Brian asks with a roll of his eyes.

Hannibal ignores all of this in favor of the mystery of Will’s ability to function even in the face of temptation. Indeed - the question that needs an answer. While Hannibal dreads getting back into the car to begin the nightmare of labyrinthine interconnecting city streets again, with additional guest appearances by more exposed skin than he’s comfortable with sans the presence of a butcher’s hanging hook and a cold smoke room (*or alternatively enough MDMA in your system to forget what your tongue is supposed to feel like - a one-time experiment off of Burnside Street in the mid 2000s while in Portland for a lecture*), he wants to know. How exactly *is* Will able to run away from the inevitability of attraction while everyone else is three sheets to the wind?

He grabs the cell phone and badge. “Once more into the fold,” he says with a shrug, seemingly inconvenienced externally, but excited to discover what’s on the other end of the long road out to Will’s house.

The end of the long road to Will’s house, which is still a delicate shade of yellow in the margins of the road where the rare passing residential traffic hasn’t scattered the allergen nightmare from the edges, ends in Will’s Volvo pulling up as close to the house as he can manage without accidentally taking the front step off the porch with the bumper. If he must venture outside into the world that has taken out a personal loan paid in a literal shit ton of pollen, all 2200 pounds of it in his yard *alone*, then he will do it as quickly as possible before any other unrecognizable feelings rise up in his chest at the idea of *his therapist*.

Will repeats this in his head a few times in his head, for emphasis. *His therapist. His therapist. His therapist.* People he's not supposed to want to sleep with for $500, Alex. People he's not supposed to literally want to open from the sternum downward and slide into like an opportunistic bat finding a bridge with just the perfect distribution of truss beams for daytime sleeping.

(*You maybe took that last business trip stop in Austin a little more seriously than is appropriate.*)

(*Sort of like your friendship with your therapist.*)

Will stomps into the house, scratching at his still-hot neck. He feels mortified at the possibility that Hannibal saw. His skills of deduction say that it's likely he did, so the next logical step is to take mortification to the literal next step of death, and just never be seen by mortal eyes again. Maybe find a high mountain village and sit until he starts dessicating on a rock, or fall into a bog to be discovered in a hundred years time, face still trapped in the same frown like he only just realized he was crushing hard on his psychiatrist thanks to the wonders of saponification.

He'll probably need to go to the grocery store to make sure he has enough food to feed the dogs until his body is discovered, but he supposes it's not the worst thing if they just eat him while they're at it. Probably not particularly tasty with the high levels of cortisol moving through his body at all hours from the stress of being Will Graham, doubly so right now, but he's local and fresh, and that's more than he's ever been able to say about dry kibble.

The sad truth is he'll probably survive, so he'll at least need some canned food and cleaning wipes for himself.

He gets back in the car. He needs a few other things to avoid humanity for the duration of this epidemic, even if he doesn't actively die in the next few hours from embarrassment. He should probably make sure he can't find anyone else to be inconveniently attracted to, like the nearest veterinarian, or Richard, the postman.

(*Odds are low - Richard is in his 70s, thinks you need to cut your hair, and can't seem to remember that it would be preferable for him to leave packages on the doorstep instead of trying to cram them into the tiny vintage mailbox you have at the front of the drive, but he's old, arthritic, and seems to take it as a personal challenge to see how much fits when smashed like a lime wedge over fajita meat, but you're not taking any chances, and the mail comes around 1 pm. "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds" is less of a motto and more of a threatening promise today.*)

But hey, look at the bright side, Will thinks with a hysterical lilt. It's not like he has to worry about vulnerability to *other* people. You know, the random romantic encounters with people he's absolutely never met before and doesn't have to worry about affecting his happiness, and his work, and his publicly perceived mental stability, the kind that is encouraged and generally perceived as healthy. That's not part of the Will Graham mood board.

That America's superstore in all its red, white, and blue glory is the closest place to Will's house that is still open regardless of impending sexual assault via plant sperm is not so much a lucky bet as it is a grim understanding. Of course it will be open. Of course it is the only option, but society being the torrent of ill-advised fucking that it is, Will must bravely not go gentle into the dying of the light and take his chances. Will doesn't want to leave his house until the crisis has passed, ergo Will must find essentials to lock himself into his house and see how far the castle doctrine will defend him if he opts to beat someone to death for trying to manhandle his manhandle under the influence of pollen.

It is a string of words he did not think he would have to worry about, and yet.

He pulls into the parking lot - still half full.

Great.

OPEN FOR JANET, reads a long progression of poster boards that have been hastily drawn on with permanent marker. Additions made by the general populace include several small dicks, daisies with decidedly suspicious faces inside the eye of the flower, and at least thirty phone numbers promising "a good time."

Will shudders underneath his newly applied respirator mask, a pair of latex gloves, and a windbreaker he has normally worn for rainy fishing trips with his father off the coast of Maine. When investing in waterproofing while his old man fiddles with gaiters on the back wall, protection from coitus never crosses his mind, but truly, buying the thing that lasts instead of a cheap solution comes through for Will once again.

(*Technically, you **did** think it would certainly unintentionally save you from any potential coitus because of the heinous shade of puce it is, and the reflective racer stripes at the shoulders, making you look like a bionic kidney, but nobody needs to know that because they can clearly see it.*)

The senior greeter at the door looks suspicious at first when Will approaches, but gives a relieved look from behind their flimsy bandana.

“Glad to see not everyone is an idiot today,” she says. “Can’t say you won’t run into some of the ones who are.”

“Fending off a lot of advances?” Will asks absently, not really thinking about it until it’s halfway out of his mouth and positively oozes with rudeness.

The greeter is unruffled, and scratches her head. “Surprisingly yes. All the old bastards are out, and they’re not terribly worried about accidentally falling into a threesome,” she says. “Avoid home appliances and kitchenware,” she adds. “Last I saw it was...not wholesome or food safe.”

(*You imagine Hannibal in your head: “Food safe with consent, to be specific,” the words would smoothly slide between them, everyone delighted at the clarification. “We need not draw such stringent lines in the right company.” You smile from the safety of your mask, and feel your stomach do a somersault - still not clear of the pollen, or maybe just not clear of your admiration of him, no matter the weather.*)

Will grabs his cart with a flex of his shoulders, and beelines for the safety of his first stop - the dog supplies.

The store is a regrettable decision, the way that rubbing his face with pollen in the courtyard had been; seemingly a solution, mostly just a pain in his ass. The regrettable lack of his cell phone means he can't really call for help, and perhaps the police are fucking off or fucking around anyway, so Will mentally resolves to do whatever needs to be done to finish his shopping as soon as possible.

Having a rolling object as a battering ram boosts his morale a little bit, what small comfort that it is.

He is propositioned no less than six times between grabbing the food, a case of water, additional fishing line because a man never knows when he's going to have to live off the land to avoid anal penetration in the meat department, and additional nasal decongestants because while Beverly is good for her word, she is also not a wizard and could not have planned for Will beating a hasty retreat instead of his cock, as is known as a side effect from exposure to the pollen. There are shockingly large quantities of these remaining, while personal lubricants are absent - do these degenerates not get the runny nose with their erections, or are they just making out with their faces covered in snot so long as their hardware is frictionless? Is the sneezing and snot isolated to Will? Does everyone else just...happily ejaculate, free of nuisance?

(*And is that in general, or just pollen-related sexual relations? You wouldn't know. You're always inconvenienced by something - distraction, barely functional attraction, the absence of connection. "You're a healthy young man, you'll come around." Truly, abstinence only sex education in the South during the late 80s and early 90s was not sufficient.*)

"Janet's opened a lot of doors for me," one middle-aged man tells Will, wild eyed and absolutely threateningly hard when Will dares to sneak a look. He is holding a new DVD player for reasons unknown. "It's not so bad - don't you want to give it a try?" Will dodges him, and rolls away with his cart, completely unmoved and unaroused.

"I can't hear you with that stupid mask in the way," says a prolifically naked couple that has been riding out the pollen apocalypse by literally riding each other near the $5 DVD bin in electronics. Will dares not look too closely, just as he did with Brian and Jimmy - he is only cognizant of there being a lot of skin folds of unidentifiable purpose being used as alternatives to what by now are no doubt bodily openings that have fallen prey to Janet's call on the less careful amongst the commonwealth of Virginia. Will almost tells them that he is

experiencing the reverse of arousal looking at them even now, but then he'd have to speak up or take the mask off, and no, he will die before he lets the first comment gain any traction.

"Oh my god, what a puppy. Curly haired older men are my faaaaaavorite," says a college-aged girl, who is half of Will's mass, but twice as forward with her bare-chested fervor and two other girls of similar age in the background making out - the fabled "roommates", surely. Everyone looks like they've rolled in a pool of mustard. Will doesn't know how you'd even find that much pollen short of being an actual honey bee, but somehow they've managed.

Less keen on violently defending himself against a person with half his body weight, but still, exceedingly not at all driven to participate in any sort of intimate relations, despite having Will's traditionally favorite arraignment of dimorphic secondary sex characteristics, Will doesn't roll away from the liquor aisle so much as he sprints, eyes watering. He sneezes when someone attempts to push him towards the Garden Center and it's open air space, which is surely a trap. His mental faculties remain clear, his sex drive dead on arrival, and his nose clogged.

It's a relief, just as it's troubling.

He really *isn't* reacting to people. He really *is* exclusively affected by Hannibal. It's like his body inherently knows what it's not supposed to have, like Hannibal is a third gas station hot dog that looks appetizing instead of someone with actual influence on his life.

(*"Now we can continue, unobstructed by paperwork," says Hannibal, and your heart beats something fond and grateful, and you talk to him like an equal, not an adversary because he gave you the same, and how could anyone not find that to be fairer in form than any physical feature? How is the nod to your individuality and acuity not more enticing than wet-mouthed kisses and crude praise of your body?*)

Will pushes the cart. He dodges more people. He aches to go home, and not think about it.

He doesn't pay so much as throws a wad of $20 bills at the register, and flees to the doors. The cashier, bless her heart, sprays each with a bottle of disinfectant, painting mask on her face and the distant muttering of "can't they just freaking wait until I get the conveyor belt cleaned?"

He can do this. He can smother whatever's awakened in him.

But surely no one will blame him if he bludgeons someone to death if they tell him he doesn't need to be afraid one more time in the parking lot like he gives half a shit about the random opinions of people crawling out of their cars with the authority of the Pope walking the steps of St. Paul's.

Irony is on a tear today, which is why once Will thinks he is safely ensconced in his fortress of unremarkable single family home exurbia, with a lord's ransom in generic diphenhydramine and heating a can of chili to be eaten with flavorless flour tortillas in a stunning return to his old police force comfort habits, a car dares to enter Will's driveway.

Will contemplates the stove, turns off the burner, and puts his mask on with the resignation of a person called to do battle for the safety of the kingdom. The dogs dance at the door front like this is all wonderful.

When he sees it's Hannibal, he contemplates burning the house down with himself in it.

"It's impractical to not have a phone," Hannibal says as he walks up the porch to look through the storm door, in what is probably his most practiced reasonable tone. The contrast to his completely unreasonable protective suit over what is a formal dinner outfit is strangely at home, like he's comfortable wearing it and this isn't the first time he's needed to stick himself into what amounts to a human-shaped ziploc bag.

Will, in his equally unreasonable twenty foot distance once he resentfully lets the other man in, clad in sweatpants, and red-eyed, runny nosed, tries to think of a reason why he never needed a cell phone to begin with, and that while the gesture is appreciated, maybe it would be better for all parties involved if Hannibal could just...run it over before Will gets the compulsion to do something really stupid. Like text an ex like the clown he is, or take some inspiration from the general population and shack up with Hannibal like it's the end times, and who really cares about social mores when the local biome has decided that nature takes prerogative over inconvenient things like healthy doctor-patient relationships, and work-life

separation, and the incredibly fragility of his friendships because empathy is a bitch, and Will's trapped as a passenger in the car with it while they careen off a cliff.

"Did you take the toll road to get around the traffic backed up at Tysons Corner?" Will asks, side stepping that thought, even as he feels his cheeks flush again, but not so much as to need to fortify his position from the other side of the kitchen island. How long does this pollen stuff stay active, anyway? "Heard something about an attempt to set up a mask distribution center at the hospital since all the hardware stores turned into a meeting place for the more adventurous people, and that the lines were backed up."

(*The news report you catch that evening explains it in greater detail as somebody in the county's emergency response team misunderstanding the idea of "negative air", going on to set up candles to battle the pollen's effects instead of installing a HEPA filter which actually would do something in the drive-through tents. This makes the distribution point more of a vibe and less of a solution according to one very confused intern, courtesy of a local civil governance scholarship, but the masks are great for very exciting anonymous sex to the delicate scent of clean linen and something mahogany spiced. Mission accomplished.*)

"I've tried a few alternate routes in the past," Hannibal replies, bland and matter-of-fact. Will gets the feeling he authentically has done exactly that, but is himself too flustered to get into the details of it.

Another pause. Will's stomach gives a little cheeky wave. His nose drips copiously.

"Well," he says, trying to discreetly wipe his face. "Thank you for the phone. And your adept understanding of suburban commuter town traffic? I don't know, I guess I shouldn't be surprised," Will adds with a sigh, crossing his arms.

Hannibal's head turns a bit, still respectfully close to the front door, taking off his mask in the safety of the house. At his feet, three of seven dogs wag their tails expectantly. He puts one gloved hand down to press against a furred head, fine hairs catching against it noisily. "Your confidence in my competency is gratifying, but I assure you I am subject to trial and error as the next man, yourself included."

He pauses, pursing his lips. "How are you feeling?"

(*It's an easy answer, just not the kind you say out loud: I'm upset that this is happening. I'm upset you saw me have a tiny meltdown and run out like a Looney Tunes sketch. I'm upset that my face is on fire, and my throat feels like I've been gargling glass, but seeing you is like drinking a warm tea with honey, and that you know how to find me, and I'm happy you're here, and I know that the best thing I can do right now is stay away because you obviously aren't having the problem I am with this.*)

"Something between a seasonal cold and an adrenal issue," Will says, thinking that's the closest he can get to all of that without making this any weirder than it is.

Hannibal, never afraid to make it weird, says "Is that all, Will?"

"Adrenal issues shouldn't be laughed at," Will deadpans. "Just think how my kidneys could be failing under the weight of my constant anxiety, or my how heart tissue could be hardening at this very minute."

"Amongst other things," Hannibal hums with

Will, afraid that he's been betrayed by his sweatpants in more ways than fashionability, dares not check. It's more masculaine that way. While Hannibal doesn't seem to have a grasp on Will's impractical occasional long walks into existential melodrama that no one seems to appreciate, he is unerringly observant in physical cues, and most verbal ones. This is, as they say, a tee up for what comes next.

"There's no reason to be embarrassed, Will," Hannibal says like that is in fact true, and not a lie because there's egregious sums of things to be embarrassed about today. "You're one of about a third of the regional population that's been exposed to today's aggressive pollen bloom. If anything, it's interesting that it seemed to account for proclivity when it came up against you."

Will, subject to the thoughtless objections of a person who's never really had to think about this seriously before, blurts "I'm not gay," like this is a talisman, and that he is not even as he speaks shifting uncomfortably on his feet at Hannibal inside his house, just five long strides away from the bed in the living room. Or the armchair. Or any flat surface, really. Or why

does it have to be flat? His tastes in people are discriminatory, but need the place he enjoys them be so as well?

(*Jesus, it's worse than you thought.*)

Will grits his teeth again, not quite to the point of grinding them, but not far away either. Denial is an act of meditation, and he's not sure if that has anything to do with what he's doing right now, but he *is* in some objectively humble clothes that wouldn't be amiss in a yoga class, as well as considering how best to *not* ask his therapist if he's opposed to blowjob first-timers, and that should count for something.

By golly, he's going to see if that sticks, God so help him.

God, the perpetrator of this act of madness, does not help. Hannibal smiles, amused at the objection, but not unkind about it. Will has to look down when he sees it to count his toes, fearful of blushing to the point of panicking again. "If I were to hazard a guess, I would posit that you're potentially not entirely heterosexual either, given the situation - it's a sliding scale, as they say, but that's besides the point. Do you only experience arousal when you feel you've gotten emotionally close to someone?"

" *Christ,* we're not having a therapy session about this," Will frowns, invoking deities that really ought to **not** care about his romantic endeavors once more, and paces to the kitchen. "I thumbed my nose at chaos, and stuck my face in the void that was apparently staring back, and found out that I am apparently as broken as everyone speculated... Just in a more *specific* way than assumed."

Hannibal, respectful distance maintained to this point, strides a little deeper into the house to where Will is leaning against the wall, before both end up moving to the kitchen. "Double checked, have you?" Hannibal teases.

Will almost tells him about the store. He wants to tell him not because it reinforces his point, but because he thinks Hannibal will laugh, that he'll find it funny, that Will tells him things that he enjoys and that it's not all detangling the snarls of other people's thoughts, that some of that fascination and patience is for Will, approaching middle-age and afraid of intimacy without the security of affection.

He feels his face do something - not frown, not smile, maybe just fold pitifully on itself at that, arms stretched forward on the kitchen counter to hold him up and his head down.

From the other side of the counter, Hannibal stops, still shiny and imperviously tailored even in the midst of a biohazard. Will thinks he might hate him a little, that sour-gut kind that comes from unreturned calls, or anticipation he hasn't quite earned but accidentally expects anyway. (*Hannibal's never done that to you. It's unfair to put that on him, even if it's a fear behind the end of every ended session.*)

His hands, an inescapable bright blue from his gloves, mirror Will's lean from the opposite side, sandy hair and warm eyes coming into view as he tries to meet Will face to face once more. Will closes his eyes, letting a slow breath out, heart in his throat.

"Would you like an excuse, Will?" asks Hannibal, quietly, kind. "You thought it to be one for the lab staff - would it be so hard to accept one for yourself?"

"I don't want to be *indulged* ," Will replies, opening now suspiciously wet eyes. "I want to have control over myself, and have at least one stable relationship in my life. If I have to look like an escapee from the Battle of the Somme, or hide until every flower in the state is dead from the first frost to ensure I don't ruin my chances, I will."

"Change is uncomfortable," Hannibal concedes with a nod, eyeing Will's stove and the neglected can of chili with the trepidation of a scientist on the cusp of horror. His face relaxes though, sighing softly through his nose to let a smile creep across his face. Honest again. "Truth is a casualty to our attempts to hold it at bay."

"That would make a nice inspirational quote were it not for the fact it's about what will probably called Fuck Storm Janet on the Weather Channel in a year's time," says Will, picturing the kind of poster that would befit it. Maybe a giant picture of a pine catkin, which always looked vaguely phallic anyway.

"Do you think they'll need to start using the World Meteorological Organization's naming conventions for these?"

“Christ, I hope not,” Will rasps. “Imagine telling someone you got fucked over by Ted and everyone thinks its a sexy fungal bloom instead of a state senator or your sleazy neighbor.”

There’s a pause, where both look at some invisible point in the countertop. Will just hopes it’s invisible, and that Hannibal isn’t actually staring at the leavings of a peanut butter sandwich, or some other mess. There should be a limit on how many of those are allowed in a day, and at least five aisles of the local big box store and Will himself have already called dibs in excess of the rules.

But Hannibal’s not done.

“I must ask, Will,” Hannibal starts. “What did you think I meant when I sent you that last message?”

Will blinks. He doesn’t know - he remembers the buzz, but not the message. He hates missing things. “I haven’t looked since before I left the lab,” he confesses.

“I see,” the other man replies, nodding more, looking thoughtful. “Then I feel I must give some context, for when you do, to avoid misunderstanding.” There’s another long pause, Hannibal’s face subtly working with consideration - barely a crease in his face to be seen, eyes pointed forward and hunter-sharp, but the cogs turning somewhere underneath all that stillness in unseen gearworks. No grins or wolfish looks here, sincerity turned pointed and serious.

“Choice is the difference between instinct and intellect,” Hannibal says, quietly. “I admire your dedication to it. That you’re able to be yourself under the influence of outside forces is remarkable, and respectable.” He pulls the cell phone and FBI badge out from a conveniently placed pocket, which is still decidedly transparent like a toiletries bag, to lay on the counter. They are just as Will left them - one message unread, badge a little smudged at the corner from where he removes it with sticky, yellow fingers.

Another pause. Hannibal folds his hands together, still leaning forward, just as casual here as he is putting his hands on his knees, lord of his office and his home and all of his feelings even when Will thinks he is shaking like a small dog, and *how nice it must be to be so put together even when the world is kind of ending.*

“But I have always admired your dedication to truth, more so,” he says, catching Will’s eyes again. “You needn’t torture yourself for truths of your own, no matter how it came to you. *Especially* when everyone else’s come so easily to you.

Hannibal taps the phone. “There’s another one for you here, freely given, if you care to interpret it as such.”

It’s 5:36 pm, according to the stove clock. It’s been a long morning, and a disappointing afternoon, and he’s just beginning to come off the high of being outed as having the pedestrian and inadvisable desire to sleep with his only close friend, and fighting grown people for the right to exit a grocery aisle unmolested, “Hump Day” in its most terrible and literal final form. Will is not prepared for the lane change between cringy pick-up lines and sexual interactions to admissions of mutual feelings of tenderness. He is capable of a huge range of empathy, but sometimes pumping the breaks is for the good of everyone on the roadway.

But Will’s face goes hot, and his stomach flutters anyway. Not the extreme way it did before, too many hours removed from his exposure to the pollen, but strong enough to make him look back down to the floor.

(*The kind of stomach turns you know. Excitement, pleasure at being acknowledged, that sensation you get when someone brushes your hair, or shows you careful handling. The little tickle in your chest when you receive a letter from a friend, or you get invited to dinner, or someone thinks to refill your glass, or make sure you have a ride home. It’s not all absurdity hidden in drifting banks of golden pollen and the foolish urge to prove nature wrong - you always felt this way, and it’s only when put in contrast with the intensity of this morning that you can acknowledge it was your subtle but special regard for Hannibal Lecter, constantly present, pushed down.*)

He nods.

“I’ll think about it,” Will says, small and withdrawn, and nurturing those little thrills behind his ribs where they’re safe and native. “Not right now, but I’ll think about it.”

Hannibal merely nods, and retreats to the front door. Session over, the heat and regard of his soft considering smiles and long silences gone with him. Will listens until he's sure the car is down the driveway and on its way into the commuter horror of Wolf Trap on a weekday in a natural disaster before he sinks to the floor, and wipes his nose and eyes.

Before he goes to bed, too tired to blow his nose and concerned about his supply of tissues anyway, Will checks the screen of the phone, just to make sure no one tried to get a hold of him in between his emotional outburst at the FBI headquarters when he left it behind, and Hannibal's absurdly long drive to return it to him.

He has to anyway - he promised he would. Will has a puzzle piece to find in it.

There's a couple of emails he's missed, a request to update the software, and one unanswered message from ***Hannibal Lecter*** sent at 10:28 am, the same that buzzes in his pocket before his morning probe surprise, surely the same as the one Hannibal was talking about. From behind this - a picture of Buster sleeping, curled into a knot tight enough to be carried in a shopping bag.

Will smiles, and frowns, and smiles. He's not sure what he's supposed to feel. The dog is cute. The message is intimidating. Hannibal's name is a riot of conflicts waiting to be let out. Will doesn't know why he never checked it - maybe too distracted by Jimmy and Brian's innovative idea of a standup meeting, maybe just accustomed to seeing messages and swiping them away to remove the obligation.

(*They fester when you're not prepared for them, a buzzing in your ear, a demand for your immediate attention when you can't even command that for yourself. Hannibal would understand your inattention. He might even forgive it.*)

The emails he doesn't care about - marketing white noise, reply-all answers to class cancellations, some kind of proposed remote happy hour on the customary Thursday nights when all the longer lab classes are done for the week. Will spends about as much time on these as he does on most niceties - fuck all, and not the pollen sort. But the message will at least be seen - Hannibal wants him to. Hannibal seemed to think it was important. A freebie, from someone that drawing personal admissions from is like drawing wine from a well.

He unlocks the screen, rubbing at an itchy eye, stomach doing its now gentler turns hours after his experiment in the courtyard, and settles on a smile after all, snorting in amusement at the words glaring back up at him.

Where does this Wednesday morning find you, amidst all the destruction?

It finds me in DC, looking at orifices against my will. You?

Apparently it finds me looking for you. Don't get started without me.

Up to interpretation indeed.

Janet continues a three-day bender, going from Wednesday morning clear into Friday evening, with each nightfall prompting another miraculous dusting of pollen on every surface exposed to its sinful breezes. Where the trees should be sprouting their blossoms and leaves, the grass unfurling with wildflowers, and the chill of winter should be melting away, instead the denizens of the local area are gently powdered day after day with an existential threats to any and all friction-capable parts of their body.

NOAA is no closer to understanding **where** Janet comes from than they are in reacting in a timely manner to hurricanes and tornadoes. The Diocese of Baltimore, Baptist Convention of Maryland, and various and sundry smaller religions have ideas on the **why**, but generally disagree on what people are supposed to do about it. The spectrum seems to run from "watch your ass and say your prayers" to "do no harm, but take as many fingers as you're comfortable with".

(*No small confusion on the taking of fingers being literal or figurative, but some people turn out to not want to be touched even under the direst of horny moments, and one shouldn't forego checking if they want to keep their digits.*)

Most government organizations suspend operations out of concern for law suits, rather than what seems like it should be obvious health concerns, but that's hardly endemic to the events of the week, and generally expected by most employees and citizens. Will breathes a sigh of relief at this news, assigns a reading prompt via email, and promptly blows his nose afterwards. Maybe he can teach all of his classes moving forward from the safety of the farmhouse, web camera perpetually turned off, the bliss of informational slides overtaking his face forever more.

Other little nuisances persist no matter the circumstances. The parking meters continue to ticket expired payments, because why would they ever consider *not* doing that, as though someone could never be accidentally delayed by a street crossing, or a slow cashier, or being pulled into a flash mob of tantric sex? The retail shops and offices plow forward, because maybe someone needs a caftan or herbal shampoo for when they take a break between partners, and it would be a shame to not be the open location, all innuendos welcome to the groaning irritation of the staff.

By Friday morning, there are two factions, affected by their working hours to varying degrees:

The first of these are the people who insist on continuing exactly as they were, because the comprehension of the literal fornicating in the streets has not engaged the part of their brain that is otherwise terrified of things like children outside of wedlock, foreign foods, minorities, bars open after 2:00 am, and the terms by which people would like to be referred to. Apparently staying home to avoid damaging themselves and others is one step too far, as is taking proper precaution to make sure they're not sexually harassing people who have the misfortune of being called into work. "I'm not living in fear!" at least one gentleman is interviewed as saying in front of a local fast food joint. "I've already gotten the stuff anyway - wasn't that bad."

(*It was, in fact, that bad if you were to ask his girlfriend of the time, who was not only uninterested in "IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD, BABY" sex, but maybe preferred to not have a menage e trois with the divorcee next door to their condo. Once the haze of red eyes, the snot of a congested nose, and the vague disgust of one waking up to their club hopping early morning bad decision making clears, the girlfriend of the time opts to be the ex of the present.*)

The second of the factions are what Will comes to be a part of - practical-minded shut-ins who will definitely not be hurting from a lack of social opportunities, and with a healthy supply of foods and goods to make never answering phone calls and carefully examining packages in the mailbox for signs of the easter yellow dust look like reasonable things. Already inclined to buy the same thing that he likes twenty times over, and perfectly capable of cooking for himself, Will is in no way interested in leaving the house after his last venture into the public sphere.

It doesn't help that he's still runny-nosed, and liable to sneeze at the slightest change in air currents, or has mapped at least three routes to Baltimore that don't depend on the major commuter roadways to get there. Maintaining decorum is a challenge with all that stacked against you.

(*Bad look for your friendship, bad look for your face. Surely it's uncomfortable to proposition a friend, or to suck cock with your nose plugged up, or so the logic follows, and you're already quite cognizant of how little skill you have in that department. Hannibal's theoretical consent doesn't quite make up for your inner cringing at the idea of subjecting him to you.*)

(*Not the questionably consensual sex. Not the seasonal cold-like symptoms. You.*)

Despite all the madness beyond the door of the house, and Will's refusal to leave the property, Hannibal's text still sits on the front screen of his phone, playful, perfectly happy to be party to the madness of the day before Will even understood what that meant.

Don't get started without me.

He reads it again and again from the living room, looking out the windows to the porch gone lemon meringue yellow again. He writes a powerpoint for Monday's class. He makes notes that the police blotter is free and clear of murders in the world's current circumstances, and there are only two accidental deaths, including one grievous misuse of a UV lamp and bleach, and another ambitious but seemingly voluntary gangbang in a nearby suburb that misuses gym equipment.

He looks at the phone again. He thinks of Hannibal, carefully prodding the edges of Will's space with his eyes and the lean of his arms. He has nice hands, wide, patient.

Don't get started without me , it says, and Will thinks, *I certainly didn't want to leave you behind* .

But he does think about it. And Hannibal. And once in a lifetime opportunities to not think *too* long about.

If Hannibal were to make a bet on Will Graham's state of mind, he would place it somewhere between the clams that control the Polish municipal water supply in Warsaw in that he is sealed tight like toxic waste has been dropped directly in his tank, and the curiosity of someone who has smelled quality bread baking in an oven and would prefer to have a slice while it's still warm but is too shy to ask. With no work to distract him, he has a lot of time to decide if he is hungry.

(*Not a lot of room for murder at this time - even the Chesapeake Ripper is on leave from culling the herd while the herd works it's way through it's plant-based millennial riff on the season of love. You don't take sick animals - consider what you'd be asking your pancreas to process.*)

Hannibal leaves his invite for a taste, and leaves the house to let it percolate. Hannibal drives himself back to Baltimore, decidedly still clean and uncharted in the safety of his kill suit, and somewhat puzzled by his own mixed emotions. Hannibal watches the lines in the street glow dull white and yellow in the dark of the evening, disguising what he has no doubt is a number of evening commuters letting off some steam between beechwood groves and open fields by letting down their pants.

Eyes straight forward, watching for the street lights to turn green, Hannibal supposes Kurosawa was on to something when he said in a mad world that only the mad were sane. Living in defiance of wind-borne spermatophores when everyone else is having a rather good go of it does feel a bit wasteful.

Ah well. Picky taste is a blessing and a curse. It's not really a lost opportunity cost when you don't like what's on the sale block.

He doesn't reach out to Will Thursday morning, though he's dreadfully curious by the time he rises for the day and cancels the rest of his appointments for the week. He doesn't reach out Thursday afternoon or evening either, keeping to his home, catching up on patient notes and billing statements, and cooking with what he has available to him. Simple things like brioche with eggs, fricassee, endives with olive and roasted tomato. Things aren't looking very promising for the Saturday Farmer's Market on Federal Hill, so by Friday morning, Hannibal is beginning to contemplate if he should start rationing an assortment of antipasto and cured meats that weren't quite set aside long enough yet, but would certainly be less risky than some poor, afflicted lewd from the streets, concerns of botulism aside.

There's no chance Hannibal will ever be caught without food to the extremes he experienced in his early years, but he's become accustomed to a certain standard of living, and is a little chagrined at the idea of underperforming if he *did* need to accommodate company last minute.

(*You're an accommodating man, after all. Food, water, wine, sex, all the necessary drives in a time of uncertainty. You just might not have quail eggs as a garnish when the time comes to draw someone into your bower. A pity, but hardly a cold Baltic winter, though you wouldn't be able to tell with the way people are panicking over bread, eggs, and milk the same way they do when there's the vaguest suggestion of snow, the watery kind or otherwise.*)

He misses Will, and the surety of knowing that he's welcome, and they'll talk of nothing with a subtext of everything important. Hannibal doesn't speak plainly, but he knows Will is a smart man, and he can decide for himself if he wants to do anything with the information he has. It's depressing to consider that there's the chance he rejects it wholeheartedly as he often rejects himself, but that's Will.

That's who, no matter the reason or the convenience, Hannibal wants.

So when the phone chimes from across the kitchen island, solitary and solemn in the quiet of the house, save for the occasional sirens headed to the hospital and the *very loud* periodic congress being held across the street (*thankfully inside these days*), Hannibal is surprised as he is also somewhat out of sorts to see Will's name.

Is it always this bad on Mulberry on Friday evening, or am I just victim to another pileup?

Hannibal smiles.

I'd be careful describing yourself as part of a pileup. The meaning is somewhat changed this week , he replies, fingers lightly powdered with flour from a simple frybread recipe.

He waits - the light from outside the kitchen is fading from day to the rosy-gold of the sunset, made more vibrant these days by the haze of the pollen in the air. The weather report suggests that the air quality is quite poor, as is wise, but Hannibal is taken with its vividness, a rare beauty in the flaming burnpile of a week.

Another buzz from the counter.

I don't think I'm getting much further than this. Are you opposed to walk-up diners, or is this a reservations-only kind of deal?

His smile gains earnestness..

(*There's so little that you want, rather than acts of entertainment to pass time left vacant of actual desire. It's not coming to you the way you planned, but that's better. That's fate, God's hand correcting something that you could never truly control, only manipulate.*)

I dare say we can arrange you an escort in addition to your dinner, if that's what you're after. Where can I find you?

A few minutes pass - contemplative ones. Another chime of the phone comes, and Hannibal tries to not be too hasty in looking at it.

I'd prefer a fellow diner, if that's what this is.

It’s what this is, he thinks fondly.

Hannibal stands.

A thousand times, it’s what this is.

He puts away his work. He sets the table for two. He shrugs himself back into his protective gear with an extra tool. Surgeon’s mask over a lower profile valved respirator. Spare vinyl suit. Clean room booties over leather loafers. Rubber gloves over cuffs and freshly washed hands. Umbrella held defensively in one hand, curved handle set with a large acrylic sphere that makes an excellent shillelagh for those that can’t accept a polite no.

Really, it was a matter of practicality to keep an umbrella even before the mystery pollen, but in the presence of it, an absolute necessity to keep it out of his hair on a breezier day like today. Not very good for tweed suits, that wily pollen, or for explicitly consensual sex. Best to have a good offense as a good defense.

Will might need it, stranded in his car as he is. It’s gentlemanly to offer one in inclement weather, and much like there’s nothing about this week that isn’t inclement, but Hannibal can always afford to be gentlemanly.

Will thinks about Hannibal’s text to the point of achieving nothing, because there’s nothing that thinking will solve that talking can’t do more quickly or regrettably.

He tries to review crime scene photos, and contemplates if Hannibal likes that part of him too.

He eats more chili - he knows Hannibal isn’t a fan of that, but at least seems to not think is a dealbreaker.

He walks the dogs looking like a refugee of the Chernobyl disaster that might hit a local fishing hole on his way out, and watches them temporarily become confused about who gets to be ringleader of their impromptu dominance battle as a pack of seven animals with not a single set of active testes or ovaries between them, and wonders if they're capable of emotional attachments that overcome that, and thinks of Hannibal again.

(*Which is a little unfair to you - you're virile, you're just not a hair trigger sexual being, torn between obligate occasional arousal and a difficulty applying it to other people. Not quite on the dogs' level. Not quite on the average person's either. A median spoiler, just as Jimmy had said.*)

By the time mid-afternoon is creeping up, Will has thought about Hannibal so much, completely unaided by the dreaded pollen storm, that there's no real getting around his (*crush? hyperfixation? dreadful need to be understood in a conversation when every other word coming out of your mouth is poetry or gore?*) obsessive tendencies, and that like most things in his life, it's better discussed with a therapist, or the object of his obsession.

So, two for one. Hooray.

Will doesn't know how he arrived at the conclusion that he was going to be able to just...drive up to Hannibal's house, the very pinnacle of responsibility and good decision making, and tell him "You can't just tell me in the most oblique terms possible that you want me. Spell it out. Say it out loud, before I do something stupid when there's nothing I've avoided more in my entire life."

It sounds very good in his head. He's always had a wonderful sense of theater from behind his eyes, where he can rehearse to his heart's content, and never have a production to show for it.

What the reality provides him is back-to-back traffic for the better part of two and a half hours, appearing to end in a stalemate of cars trying to turn onto Charles Street, the easiest way into Mount Vernon Place. His imagined speech slowly recedes, forgotten in the dawning horror that he's possibly going to be stranded in the STD equivalent of "Night of the Living Dead" with nothing to show for it but a few suggestive texts, a couple of blocks worth of walking to change his mind about what he's suggesting, and take refuge in Preston Gardens

Park until the sun comes back up with another round of the continued assault on his throat, nose, and sensibilities as people continue to suggest he's missing out on something by not joining in these isolated cells of promiscuity.

(*"Yes," you could tell them, "but ponder thoroughly the idea that I am incapable of getting hard for people that don't have extensive knowledge of my traumas and proclivities towards violence, and that doesn't sound like a good time for anyone, does it?"*)

(*Except for Hannibal, who is either bad at his job, or is doing more than keeping pollen off his suits in that really quite convenient plastic shell of his.*)

Will taps the steering wheel, and glances down the sidewalk. Speaking of well-dressed devils.

It's very like Hannibal to choose the neighborhood with the oldest cathedral in the United States to live in. Inconvenient to live down the street from the Capitol building? No worries, just buy inner city historical homes in neighboring Baltimore, where Benjamin Henry Latrobe can dazzle with Greek pillars any day of the week without all those pesky embassies and motorcades in your way. That Will catches sight of him here before the whiteness of the building, hustling like a man who regularly jogs wearing full PPE and wields an umbrella, just throws it in sharper contrast what different people they are. How does Hannibal look at ease in his ridiculous coveralls while Will looks like he's escaping the scene of a crime?

But all the same, Will's relieved to see him - the normal kind of relieved, having had three days to clear his first brush with the pollen. The familiar happiness of seeing a friend in a crowd descends, and for no one and no reason, he's smiling again under his respirator mask, contemplating if he needs to shrug off his sartorial horror of a windbreaker before Hannibal can see it.

He runs out of time of course, and there's nothing he'd change about himself for another person, but it doesn't really matter - Hannibal never treats him differently than he usually does. Fond. Quixotic. Admiring.

"You walk fast," Will says, rolling down the window.

“I’ve come from down the way,” Hannibal says, projecting a bit over his layered masks, hand atop the roof of the car after he’s closed the umbrella and checked his hands for signs of pollen stains. “I don’t think you’ll be moving very far today. Seems there’s at least fifteen cars in the intersection that have created an impressive network of hookup opportunities.”

“Throw it in park and pray to not be towed?” Will shrugs.

Hannibal turns his head, nodding consideringly. “While I think the likelihood of the tow company reaching for much other than a gross misuse of the tow chains at the moment, you can bill me for the impound if they do. Call it the cost of being a considerate host if that makes it better.”

It doesn’t, but it’s a solution, whereas staying here isn’t.

Will sighs, turns the engine off and steps out. He feels strangely naked without the safety of the car, but Hannibal is the sort of casual in the face of urban dysfunction that only monks can aspire to, looking totally at ease with the possibility of needing to hit someone. Act like you belong, the adage comes unbidden. They leave the street, taking stock of the progression of cars from the sidewalk.

A few minutes pass - people run by in varying states of dress. The library across from the cathedral locks it’s doors and clerks watch suspiciously from the glass. Hannibal comments on none of these things, unflappable and even-breathing to his side, patient.

Will’s hand rattles his keys in his pocket, and shuffles his feet.

“Nervous?” comes the question seconds later.

Will adjusts the mask, and takes a noisy breath inside it, hollowed out.

(*He knows all your tells. He knows where to find you. He bothered to run down the street before you could commit to it yourself, lest you run in the opposite direction. You can say yes,*

and be honest, and reward the both of you with clarity.)

"Yes," he grunts, fussing with the filters to either side of his face. It's weird talking to Hannibal this way, face covered but feeling strangely naked - obfustication not being the order of the day. "For obvious and less obvious reasons. Obvious being that things...don't seem to have improved in the last couple of days."

"Rather a failure of the state and the country to do anything of note about it other than watch with a voyeuristic interest, yes," Hannibal says with the authority of a person accustomed to seeing failed states. Will supposes maybe he does - he's never really learned much about Hannibal outside his time in Italy and France, but Hannibal goes to great pains to turn conversations away from himself beyond the occasional anecdote. Harmless and precious topics, stories of elderly grandmothers met on pilgrimage paths, teachers of obscure pasta recipes, chance meetings in Prague and Marrakesh - low risk.

That he admitted to any attraction, no matter how obliquely, is worth note. That it's to Will is almost unbelievable.

True to form, Hannibal continues, adding "Tell me the less obvious ones."

Will shuffles again, keys grinding between gloved hands. "Does a person have to explain the pollen...pollen booty call, I guess?"

He can't see it, but Hannibal is certainly smiling. "They do when they sound like an otoscope isn't going to show much in the way of pollen."

"Already getting the specialty tools out. Kinky," Will replies.

Hannibal looks heavenward before turning to look at the cathedral behind them, arms folded thoughtfully, unruffled. "You were worried about your autonomy in the decision, and beyond that, your stability after it was made. I have a hard time believing three days in your house is much different than being snowed in for a long weekend - not particularly life altering, unless you've addled yourself eating tinned beans for three squares a day, or whatever it was I saw."

Another roll of the eyes, this time from Will.

“The axis changed,” he says, ignoring the jab, but still feeling strangely pinned. How does he explain? *Oh, you sent me a message and told me to intepret it. Did I get it wrong?* No, too casual. *I think you like me, but I don't think anyone likes me, so the only way to make sure is to get you to say it.* No, too pathetic. “It altered my perspective, or maybe I should say made me curious. You’re,” and Will thinks for a second, chewing the corner of his mouth with blunt teeth, “not really all that easy to read.”

Will shuffles, turning himself to the church yard. “But your visit. That...that seemed transparent enough, and it’s like a cut in the corner of my mouth that my tongue keeps poking, not knowing what doing nothing would mean.”

“The relationship is shifted,” Hannibal supplies. “It doesn’t fit the space you assigned it any longer.”

Will nods, looking up to the towers to either side of the cathedral apse, a pretty green copper protecting the dome and spires of the bell towers. They are muted at the edges, golden powder caught in the details and porticos - just one giant accidental monument to Janet the way the trees at home and the muddy banks of the road are.

“Cat’s out of the bag,” Will says. “Might as well see what kind it is.”

There’s a time when they might be content to simply watch the rosy glow of the sunset falling behind them, and the soft red and pink of it caught in the finials and keywork above the portal doors. Will feels the stirrings of obligation to do something, but Hannibal seems content. Maybe this is Hannibal’s idea of a date - listening to society tear its shirt buttons in its haste to fall apart, and him, peaceful, finding something unmoved in the flood. It would suit him, the way the dinners do, and the elegant office, and carefully articulated speech no matter the subject - tendon elasticity in post-mortem investigation or office liasons, or as the case may be, co-worker and patient ones.

He takes stock of the moment.

It’s the end of an era. The cars on the street are abandoned, Will’s included. The windows of the neighboring book store are boarded up. There’s an elaborate matrix of trash in the wrought-iron fence of the basilica, varying from newspapers to self-help flyers, to discarded and hastily printed safe-sex flyers distributed by the library across the street in a last desperate bid to stymy the yellow tide just outside their doors.

Hannibal and Will stand at the gate, staring up to the towers of the grand white building, watching the fading sunset touch it, more vivid and warm than the powdery remnants of the pollen trying to blow southwards back into the bay.

Eventually, Hannibal turns, resolved to something. His gloved hand comes up to unlatch his mask from either side of his head, the press of the edges a red ring around his smooth mouth. He checks the gloves again with his eyes, before gesturing to Will.

“If you are comfortable without,” he says quietly, in the low tones Will is accustomed to, the forced projection beneath the mask never quite sitting right with Will, like he was a student or an employee.

(*Or a patient, you supply with a wince, pulling the mask from your face.*)

Hannibal waits, watchful, and Will flexes his face, feeling the blood rush back into his cheeks. He’s almost forgotten what the world smells like - gasoline because it’s not a party without at least one fiery wreckage, the damp of the harbor crawling up the city streets, the gentlest cloying scent of lemon from what’s presumably the pollen. He must have not noticed it the first time, too fixated on if he was about to wildly gyrate into the sprinkler system if the lab team wasn’t just setting up an elaborate prank.

He shouldn’t be surprised by Hannibal’s hand coming up, but he is, and how the thumb pulls at the corner of his mouth and outwards to his ear before pressing a curl that’s been crimped from the elastic behind Will’s ear.

And just as gently as he does that, he moves forward to savagely bite the other corner of Will’s mouth, a bright shock of pain next to the pleasant softness of his fingers only seconds before.

Will very nearly jumps back, not nervous now but definitely cautious, heat rising from his neck to tinge his ears the same color of the pillars beyond, but Hannibal draws him in at the shoulder to catch his mouth again in a soft-lipped kiss, prodding gently with his tongue at where Will thinks he might now be bleeding just the smallest amount.

"A cut in the corner of your mouth, you said," Hannibal sighs, forehead almost leaning into the side of Will's temple, listening to Will breathe when he pulls away. "Something to worry about. You give me most of those to think about with you, once a week, to press with you until it becomes something useful, or grotesque, or beautiful." He pauses, teeth nipping again, Will very nearly holding his breath at each aching pull.

Hannibal's hand comes up to his neck, continuing. "I'll press on this, just the same as the rest of you, the same as any other sharp feeling you have that you give me. Any day of the week. Any way you'll have me, as long as it's what you want."

Another insistent, hurtful probe at the cut, and the pooling warmth of his gut growing wider. "The rest will fall into the shape it needs to be," Hannibal adds, surely close enough to feel Will's butterflies like he's tended them himself.

And doesn't sound that wonderful, Will thinks with a sigh, properly bringing their heads together while his heart does a gallop in his chest, taking in a long breath to get around his nose and the edges of his panic.

"The pollen probably makes it easier, to get started," Will huffs, too overcome to do much other than make jokes. "Once the sneezing subsides."

Hannibal understands anyway, because that's who he is, and why he's here with Will. His mouth twists up - it's a new experience feeling it against his scalp instead of seeing it, but Will can imagine it, pleased, not grinning, but at ease and unpracticed. This he can add to his collection, unique for the moment. "Yes, I'm sure it does," Hannibal hums. "The cure sometimes being worse than the disease."

"Only social failures think having an allergic reaction that ends in fucking is worse than being lonely."

“Then it’s good to find a likemind in this matter,” Hannibal rejoins, delighted and face still hidden. When he pulls away, it’s still the inscrutable Hannibal he knows, but alive and bright in the eyes.

“Shall we?” he asks, and gestures to the wrought iron fence, which above the mess at the ground level is laden with velvety yellow, as cheery and bright as the heart of a daisy waiting for them. As far as extreme solutions go, doing a line of sex pollen on the bannisters of your psychiatrist’s neighborhood basilica with the intent to have relations beyond the doctor-patient ones is probably worthy of an award. Not the awards you get congratulated for, but an award nonetheless.

“Do you think there’s much carbon pollution from street traffic on these?” Will asks, eyeing the fence rails and the golden-tipped fleur-de-lis at each tip with apprehension.

“If you’re suddenly conscientious of that sort of thing, do you think there’s trace amounts of fecal matter in the average can of chili?” Hannibal retorts. “Rodent, bovine, human, et cetera. It’s not like sex is a particularly sanitary thing in and of itself either.”

“Fair enough,” Will replies with a groan, but laughing. He considers that maybe he really is just *this* bad at being cooperative, maybe he’s not meant to connect with people and Hannibal who’s supposed to be good at this kind of thing is just missing because theoretically Will might have other good qualities.

He thinks he’s spiraling, until he’s not - Hannibal is looking at him, and Will’s swiping a finger on the top rail with a bared hand. He’s feeling the oily spread of it between the pads of his fingers, and he’s looking up at Hannibal doing the same, thoughtful before his own first time under the influence. The space between them feels resolved, but perhaps a little bashful.

“Lime flower, maybe?” the other man asks, pale brows raised after taking a gentle sniff.

“Or something entirely alien. Hell if anyone knows,” Will says with a frown, looking back down to his fingers. “I don’t know if I really thought about it on Wednesday.”

“You were too nervous to consider,” Hannibal suggests.

“Alternatively I just can’t smell worth a damn after years in a cadaver lab with enough menthol under my nose to kill a man,” Will says with a wry smile of his own.

He inhales, face first into the tips of his fingers, and coughs. The sensation is much the same as the last time - not any extreme like an immediate erection, just first thoughts on how best to recover from the burning in his nose. But he does smell something this time.

“Citrus,” he repeats between desperate attempts to clear his throat, choking a bit. “Yeah, I guess I can see that - must have been obsessing over the drainage pipe too much to pick it up.”

“Come again?” asks Hannibal, who wouldn’t know Will had concerns about this kind of thing before.

“Not in the drainage pipe, anyway,” Will says with a smooth face before going red-faced at Hannibal’s toothy grin - unusual, saved for special occasions. His chest is full to bursting with white light and the tickling of his heart against the butterflies in his stomach. He is full of joy, and growing warm beneath that, he is full of biting kisses of his own that want to become cuts to suck on during the day, and to think about.

Hannibal chases after, inhaling long and slow, and when they meet eyes, his are dark, and fond, and still at the end of the day Hannibal’s, as they always were.

It is a six minute walk from the basilica to Hannibal’s house - much of this is conducted in a fairly reasonable manner, like they're just strolling through a world event and there's no need to rush. They shed the gloves at first because they’re no longer needed, and honestly, wouldn’t it be nicer to take a look at each other’s hands, maybe hold them a little if Will’s feeling particularly brave? Also, no need for masks - “We’ve already loaded up the olfactory

tract with pollutants," Hannibal says very matter of fact, but starry eyed. "They're not going to be much good at this point."

With those gone, the reasonable walk and manner starts taking a ride down a slippery slope, as if the addition of little flashes of bare skin was the aphrodisiac and not the pollen.

A warm hand demands a warm wrist. The curve of a jaw requires the long cord of a neck. What is this heinous looking jacket that Will is wearing? What good is this clean suit Hannibal is wearing like an escapee from an outerwear startup from Seattle that's trying to solve the problem of how best to show off one's double lapels? Hell, the clothes underneath either seem kind of inconvenient - best get out of them as soon as possible.

The walk turns into more of a jog.

They get about halfway to the house before Will starts shedding layers like this is expected and normal, and he supposes it is with how things have been running for the last couple of days, so really, he's just playing the group party games for once instead of playing at being the wallflower. Who's honestly going to have the presence of mind to judge?

(*Not the people in that last coffee shop the two of you passed anyway. Good grief.*)

Hannibal's outfit is a series of elaborations - the vinyl is an inconvenience, but he gets the front of it low enough to start working at fussy buttons and cuffs, walking with a pointed stride that would probably be terrifying from a stationary position, but is only a relief to Will who keeps thinking *inside-inside-inside* , unsure if he means in the house, or something else entirely, only that one or the other is necessary.

The three minutes from this descent to the front door are very nearly a mad sprint. Will thinks he waves off an opportunistic attempt at being a third wheel. A neighbor tries to waylay Hannibal, who practically waves *them* off like he's in a parade and can't hear much of anything being said, and he's terribly sorry, he'll catch up with them soon, but it looks like their lemon trees have recovered without incident, whatever *that* means. An officer looks like he might stop them, thinks for five second about it, and averts his eyes instead.

Both of them scramble up the stairs in what becomes an embarrassing tangle of shirt sleeves, and arms down the fronts of undershirts, and Hannibal pushing the handle of the door like it's become quite complicated since he left it only a short time ago.

(*Your brain is boiling in your head, so maybe his is too. Every point is fixated on how best to get closer, further in, underneath. You've cut open onions that have had less layers than Hannibal Lecter does, and that's just the clothes - you can feel the edges of his nesting doll personhood, and you're only a couple of reveals in.*)

The door closing is permission for the true downward slide to begin.

Will hits the wall like a truck pushed him there, rattling a frame near to his head while Hannibal is tearing out of the bottom half of the vinyl like it's offended him personally, annoyed with its resilience to being pulled over his shoes. It's surprising how strong he is, but it's also surprising how the force snaps Will's skin into pain, and that pain becomes arousal, and Hannibal can bring his mouth back to Will's in the quiet safety of his home where he doesn't have to worry about if they're covered by the cedars out front, if he's going to have to keep his neighbors *more* out of his business than any person should have to plan for, if he can tear the lips there, if Will will let him.

(*I would, I will, I will, you think, and just as savagely leave a ring of teeth in white, red, and purple on the rise of Hannibal's neck from his shoulders. You're matching him. Maybe he's matching you. Maybe you're more alike than farmhouses, and basilicas, and business partnerships have let you consider.*)

So add that to the previously unexplored kink list. A person being rough with him. *Hannibal* being rough.

Will pushes back, hard enough to push Hannibal off balance, stumbling a bit into the wall behind. That too awakens something, being rough in return. He's curious what a bruise looks like on him, if he'd be shocked by it, if he'd ask for more. Hannibal catches him by the waist, and they spin earthwards, all nails and teeth and bloody grins.

Hopefully there's something left of either of them by the end of this.

He drops to the floor, never making it out of the foyer, but neither does Hannibal. They're losing clothes like petals on old flowers, and there's a fire in him that might be one part stuffed nose because sex pollen or not, it's still an allergen, but it's already several parts more of that terminal burrowing feeling, like he belongs on the other side of Hannibal's ribs, running fingers along the silverskin there underneath. Hannibal must feel something of this, because red and watery-eyed or not, his hands come down to pin Will at the shoulders until they can both feel the bones grind.

It's a relief. There's no thoughts of gender, or sexual awakenings, because this is essential and the rest of that is details which don't make the report. Hannibal has wide hands with blunt nails, and he rakes Will how dogs rake at soil, looking for damp scents beneath. Will has wiry arms that cling to the point of pain for either, hooking around the other man's back from his position on the floor until there's no space between them. Hannibal only breaks this deathgrip with gentled teeth, scraping the scruff at Will's jawline and neck, hands working their way to Will's ambiguously torn trousers, mouth following.

He is naked at the waist and cold, until he is naked at the waist and burning hot.

Will imagines he sings a whole chorus of a hymnal in record time when Hannibal takes his cock out and down his throat like he's been professionally sword swallowing since joining the circus in his youth. But maybe that's the benefits of appreciating a thing with your tongue and taste - you don't think twice about a pour of a nice wine, or enjoying a demi glace, or how Will shudders with each slick-smooth brush of the velvet of his cheeks and throat.

The heat blooms in his chest once more, not sated but basking.

Hannibal works him so furiously that Will's toes curl, and he doesn't bother at all with words, only how best to keep the air moving between his lips, each breath stinging against new splits.

Clearly Hannibal's not having any concerns about conflicts of interest, or sexuality either. If anything, Will's a little worried Hannibal's going to end the whole thing too soon with how committed he is to the end game. It's a tragedy that he has to think about the endoscope incident to regain control of his hands long enough to pull away.

"Please," he pants. "Please."

Hannibal looks to Will, rocks his jaw to work out the soreness there, and only slides lower. “If I may,” he says rough and playful, and never actually waiting for an answer.

Will would like to say he is respectfully silent and considerate of Hannibal at the first sucking probe of tongue, lips and teeth at the cleft of his ass, but he’s pretty sure he gasps at the sensation, twisting until Hannibal uses his arms to hold him, choosing a leisurely pace that suits him.

Onward it goes, exploratory, sopping wet, working until he relaxes enough to worry less about the newness and think more about the stretch, how his thighs tremble with each motion, legs wider until Hannibal’s hands at last can relax, palms down on the spread of white skin.

Discovery three for the day - under the influence of pollen, he *will* in fact cough unprompted for a prostate check. He’d laugh, but Hannibal takes his job seriously, as doctor’s often do, but does it with such drawn out slowness and skilled fingers that Will very nearly asks to go back to what they were doing before, left floundering and unfamiliar with the sensation.

Like the tongue and teeth, it improves, it warms like honey, it spreads from gut to knees to toes, Hannibal watching, pulse ticking in his neck.

Will recalls in college having a moment very late at night under the influence of a substantial amount of questionable red drink that he wondered why everyone was so obsessed with dating, and sex, and the constant drive to fit that like a puzzle piece to the fabric of their existence. Sure it was nice - orgasm is akin to a really long, satisfying sneeze, with a lesser aerosol and droplet count at the end of the event, which isn’t the most popular take. Similar to walking into the sunlight from a cold room, or scratching an itch, but no richer in company that solo, and rarely provoked out of need. He fakes the obsession with it well enough to have healthy conversations and dates as a young man, but lacks that need. He’s fine. Will’s detached physically, too wound up emotionally.

(*“Too weird to date,” you say, and Alana takes you at face value, and the Quantico and FBI staff privately agree.*)

It’s different. It’s so different this time.

Sure, it could be the pollen. Yeah, it could be the three day tease. (*Months long tease. Years long tease. A lifetime of missing the mark.*) But Will thinks it's that this is a person who knows him, that can pull his hands away from the examiner's table and know what he saw there, and still want to take him around the back of the churchyard and snort mystery organic matter like it's no big deal, he'll do it with Will.

Hannibal thinks Will likes killing people, even if he doesn't like the before and after. Hannibal knows Will would rather put on his headlamp and stare into the intestines of a morgue drawer's occupant, scrying for information there than go to the team lunch. He knows all that, and he's still two fingers knuckles deep, working Will slow and methodically as if the pollen was a bump at a party, not an essential driver of this moment. He'd put all of his fingers if he could - Will thinks maybe he'd put the whole of himself if it was possible, that he wants to see everything.

(*You'll realize later, it's not the pollen, and maybe it never was for him. Hannibal doesn't need that. It's just fun, a holiday to excuse what he already wanted to do - the delirium of other people, and your acceptance of him through it, and maybe it never was for you either, because you feel the same.*)

So this time, unlike the times by himself, or perfunctorily for others, orgasm warms him up and still surprises him when it crests over the wall of his resistance and Hannibal's mouth, gone again to curl his toes and roll his eyes into the back of his head with suction, and heat, and the darkness of his eyes that take this in with the same kind of dedication he takes his meals, and his sessions, and apparently his sex pollen like he's cutting it with a credit card.

Hannibal shudders his own release, a searing mound of human now crashing down onto Will, not the untouchable man in a suit that reads Will like the newspaper. His mouth and cheeks are a riot of color from Will's teeth, and beard, and the work of his own design. The darkness of his eyes is still there, but less fervent, focusing now.

They consider the ceiling of the foyer. They breathe around each other's mouths, Will's a little wheezy, Hannibal's overwhelmed.

"It's only strange at first," Hannibal says hoarsely when Will is capable of disseminating a single thought. "The effects of the pollen. Hot, burning, urgent. Every delay between the first

breath and this moment is calamitous."

"The rest is just what you were always thinking of, however you were thinking it," Will nods, finger trembling, breaking apart the carefully gelled form of Hannibal's hair, and marveling that he's allowed to do it. The two of them together are sticky as the yellow of the pollen, heaving chests, the muted gleam of sweat in the hall light where Will knows the dining room is just beyond.

(*You always just wanted to be known first, and that would be the benefit, not the detraction, your body just a vehicle for what is you inside of it. There was only one person in your life capable of it, and only one force in it that could make you face that music - your powers of denial working against itself at the absurdity of natural forces. You versus you.*)

The effects don't fade immediately. They simply ebb, like a tide heading out briefly to recollect itself into another wave. It gives them a chance to make the trip up the stairs, and to Hannibal's room, an order of magnitude more comfortable than the hard floor of the entry. Will doesn't often feel old, but he at the very least feels worn in.

Like clockwork, the urge comes back - heat in his gut, hands wandering, the need to say something but nothing really coming out, so instead tearing at each other, trying to grow into the other - weeds growing out of cracks in a stone, home to each other.

Because Hannibal is Hannibal, they try a few things.

Hannibal's house, unlike the rest of the Baltimore area, has no such shortage of expensive cooking oils. Will would dare say he probably has an oil for every day of the month if he puts his mind to it and doesn't have favorites. This is a good thing - while Will is feeling decidedly adventurous when he's not trying to clear his throat or his nose, he's not feeling quite so adventurous as to try and orally work his way through the complications of anal sex.

So Beverly is right in this respect - there does appear to be some accounting for preference, even if it turns out that unlike her, Will is at least a little bit into butt stuff.

(*Perish and die for that thought, you witheringly think, gasping into the back of Hannibal's hand pressed into the bedding nearest to your head.*)

"Coconut," Hannibal says quite cheerfully, leaning up on his elbows in the dark, comfortable in his nudity. "For this particular application. I keep my bedroom Grecian in theory and reality, but globalism has its benefits, and olive oil stains terribly."

"Oh for the love of God, shut up and tell me what to do," Will laughs, and crawls onto the bed over the other man, who's generous with his affections, and his knowledge, and just *smiling, smiling, smiling* .

Saturday dawns on tired bodies and an open bedroom porthole window. Will opens an eye to take in the selective darkness of the bedroom, and the slivers of light that cut over Hannibal's body to his, morning taking its pound of flesh in white bands across the bed. There is a small layer of pollen that escorts itself through the window like Ali Baba in the bandit's cave, scattering gold over the white of the sheets.

Hannibal seems to not notice, but Hannibal admits at 2 in the morning to his ears beginning to clog a bit under the pressure in his sinuses, and goes to shut his eyes with the gratefulness of a person holding a headache at bay by force of will. It's not all fun and games, this fooling around under the influence.

Technically, Will would say that God has won this round. He didn't expect it, and he didn't prepare for it as pollen disaster wouldn't have even made his top 20 reasons to doomsday prep his house, so he'll concede absolute defeat on this one. It's kind of poor sportsmanship that it didn't just magically clear up the second that Will resigned himself to what came next, insides dancing with the magnetic pull of finding and accepting Hannibal as something that he wanted. Maybe it's a good thing though, because his car is in the middle of a major thoroughfare in a large downtown street, and Hannibal has offered to pay the costs, but honestly Will just wants to know he's going to be able to go out to the dogs and make sure they're settled, and it's better if he's not left holding the bag on this whole society destroying pollen pop-up event.

Can't just laze around like it's the last days of Rome, he thinks, even if the times rather required that mindset. He doesn't know what he'd call this whole experience if not the prelude to the fall of the American Republic. Not by fire, not by ice, but the grievous lack of respect for environmental changes, and honestly? Good for Janet.

Will stares at the ceiling. There's a mirror. He's not sure how he missed it. He wonders what else he missed between the front door and now.

Another one for last days of Rome, he adds with a nod, and traces with his eyes the path of the damage starting from cheeks to navel in his reflection, trickling streams of bruises and little capillaries bright and happy red just beneath the skin's surface. The long line of where he failed to clear the door of the lab is particularly unattractive today, starting to grow yellow at the edges. Attempting to play running back against Cold War era architecture was not one of his better ideas.

"I suppose I should have closed the window," Hannibal rumbles, awake, but eyes shut. "Fresh air is a backwards thought in an airborne epidemic, but…" he gestures one handedly at the mess of the room. Coverlets cast aside, with wrinkled pillows, creative uses of sock garters, all the best features of a Bacchanal all the way down to a 40-year-old bottle of wine taken from the racks of the pantry in a fit of whimsy close to midnight.

"Not like it can get us any worse than it did mid-influence," Will grouses. "Surely there's diminishing returns, or do we get the walking pneumonia sexy Halloween costume equivalent?"

"What a perverse idea," Hannibal says, pleased. "We should find out."

The sheets rustle. The radio crackles nearby, cheerfully beginning a morning roast of the people roaming the streets burning bras for far less noble reasons than is typical, and the follies of a perfume department of a major department store where everyone was feeling particularly Sapphic after applying scents to each other and saying you have to rub the skin to get a feel for what it smells like on the person, turning the whole thing into heavy petting between the makeup and the menswear.

There are no security clearance passes to return here, no appointment books, prescriptions, thoughtful suggestions for ways to cope with interacting with strangers. There *is* one body

that they'll inevitably end up face down in hanging around in the cellar, but that's for another day, when the medical paraphernalia is sanitized, and someone successfully clears the roads. Surely even the Chesapeake Ripper would stay out of Janet's business.

Will throws the covers over his head, imagining the yellow cloud it kicks up, and slides close to Hannibal. They joke about fleeing to the countryside to wait out the Plague like the medieval Italians. They smile.

Chapter End Notes

SO LONG. WHY WAS THIS SO LONG.

Thanks again to the Twitter folk - join me at @chaparralcrown for future writing prompt polls, screaming about Hannibal things, and story updates!

Works inspired by this one

[Podfic] shaken from bell towers to our shoulders by Dr_Fumbles_McStupid

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!